

# THE HISTORY AND EFFECTS OF THE KOSOVO POLJE MYTHOLOGY

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MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE  
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## ABSTRACT

THE HISTORY AND EFFECTS OF THE KOSOVO POLJE MYTHOLOGY, by MAJ Peter B. Lugar, 80 pages.

The mythology surrounding the 1389 Battle of Kosovo Polje, in present-day Serbia, is the foundation for the Serbian cultural identity and is a prism through which Serbs view and interpret the past, present, future. The mythology, created out of necessity to cope with Ottoman conquest and the hardships of peasant life, began with early eulogies to the Serbian knights who were defeated on the Kosovo plain. It evolved through oral folklore tradition, epic poetry, and literature while being preserved and cultivated by the Serbian Orthodox Church. Epic themes of Serbian religious sacrifice, heroism, martyrdom, and struggle combined with victimhood, betrayal, and revenge provide the foundation of the mythology. Heroic and villainous characters evolved to dramatize the story from the deified Serbian Prince Lazar and warrior-hero Milos to the traitorous Vuk Brankovic and the occupying Ottoman Turk. The effects of the epic mythology range from simple first-order effects such as individual beliefs to second and third order effects such as cultural mobilization, nationalist political action, and justification for war. The study of the Kosovo Polje mythology provides a lesson in the strength of symbolic cultural beliefs, whether fact or fiction, and the importance of understanding the history of those beliefs.

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This study is dedicated to my family and the families of soldiers everywhere.

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## Serbia and Montenegro



Figure 1. Map of Serbia and Montenegro  
Source: Central Intelligence Agency



## Bosnia and Herzegovina



Figure 2. Map of Bosnia-Herzegovina  
Source: Central Intelligence Agency

## Croatia



Figure 3. Map of Croatia  
Source: Central Intelligence Agency





## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Kosovo is the equator of the Serbian planet.<sup>1</sup>

Poet Matija Beckovic, 1989

Winston Churchill once stated that the “Balkans produces more history than it can consume.”<sup>2</sup> With a myriad of cultures and subcultures, each claiming a chosen history bound to overlapping ethnic territory and endorsed by god, Churchill’s statement is justified. Memory in the region based solely on ethnic interpretations of history, without consideration of alternative interpretation, has been, and still is, the primary means to view the past, present, and future. This way of “contemporizing the past and historicizing the present” through stories, symbols and myths creates effects ranging from cultural awareness and celebration to the justification of ethnic cleansing and murder.<sup>3</sup> In Serbian history, the historical context through which people and events are interpreted has as its foundation the mythology that surrounds the battle of Kosovo Polje.

In 1991, Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milosevic issued a warning to the world about Serbian intentions should the crumbling Yugoslavian Federation finally collapse. He stated that the “Serbs who want to return to the Serbian fatherland have the right to do so and the Serbian nation will enforce that right.”<sup>4</sup> The year following that warning, the Yugoslav Federation was fragmented, and Milosevic made good on his promise. His intent was to create a Greater Serbia by “re-claiming” ethnic territory in neighboring Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. Serbian military and paramilitary forces embarked on a campaign in 1992 to claim what they felt was Serb territory and to “protect” Serbs living in the region. That war, which was sparked in the name of nationalism, would burn

throughout the Balkan region for half of the decade and produce some of the worst atrocities in Europe since World War Two. The following story is just one example.

Bosnian Serb General Ratko Mladic was elated about the ground his Serb forces gained in recent weeks in the summer of 1995 near the town of Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia. Those around him later described how he was on “a perpetual high.”<sup>5</sup> Mladic was enjoying the annual 28 June Serbian celebration of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo Polje. The medieval battle occurred between the Ottoman Turks and an alliance assembled by Serb noblemen led by Prince Lazar Hrebeljionovich. The anniversary, known as Vidovdan, is a commemoration of the medieval battle and the Serbian epic story that has evolved over time with heroic and sacrificial themes that define the Serbian cultural identity. Balkans historian and Milosevic biographer Louis Sell relates a description of the Serb general, “Mladic appeared to identify himself and the Bosnian Serb people with Tsar Lazar and the Serbs of the battle.”<sup>6</sup> His Serbian forces were a few days away from attacking yet another key city in the eastern portion of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The objective was the Bosnian town of Srebrenica, a designated “safe area” by the United Nations (UN). By the summer of 1995, the Balkans had been in conflict for three years and the Serbs were fighting to secure land in Bosnia-Herzegovina for a future Serbian republic adjacent to Serbia proper just over the river Drina to the east.

On 11 July, Srebrenica fell to Mladic and his Bosnian Serb forces with full support from Mother Serbia. Dutch Balkan researchers Willem Honig and Norbert Both describe the general’s elation: “Clearly on a high, the Serb general told television viewers that the moment of revenge against the 'Turks' had finally come. Speaking from 'Serbian Srebrenica' he gave the city as 'present to the Serb nation.’”<sup>7</sup> One must now ask, why

would a general speak on television and refer to revenge against the Turks when they were not even in the area? Moreover, what had they done to warrant revenge? After all, the Bosnian Serbs were the aggressors. The answers lie within Serbian history itself.

The price for that “present” and the horror that occurred with the fall of Srebrenica is burned into history as the worst European massacre since World War II. In a planned and calculated military operation that lasted for ten days in July 1995, Serb forces commanded by General Mladic separated all Bosnian Muslim men and boys between the ages of twelve and seventy-seven from other family members. The Serbs forced twenty-three thousand elderly, females, and children from their homes and loaded them onto waiting busses for transport west out of the town to Bosnian-held territory. They then systematically murdered approximately seven thousand men and boys using a variety of means from small arms weapons to artillery or simply the bayonet to accomplish their mission.<sup>8</sup> The operation included the well-planned assembly, interrogation, murder, and disposal of the Muslim men and boys or “Turks” as the Serbs labeled them. Retreating UN forces in the area described the horror as they “heard repeated small-arms fire to the north of the town, where the football pitch and the grave site were located. The next day, two Dutchbat [UN Dutch Battalion] soldiers saw 500-700 bodies along the road.”<sup>9</sup> Honig and Both describe the scene where one of the Serb participants, twenty-five-year-old Drazen Erdemovic, claimed to have no choice but to follow orders:

Two members of the military police of the Drina Corps made ten people get off the bus and led them to about twenty metres [*sic*] from the line which we formed. We were given the order to fire. The next group of ten men taken off the bus saw what had happened to the first group: They begged us “Don’t shoot us!” . . . In all, the squad dispatched fifteen to twenty busloads of men. Erdemovic

estimated that some 1,200 men were killed in five and a half hours, of which he “only” shot seventy. The terrified and horrified bus drivers were also made to kill at least one Muslim, “so that they would never be tempted to confess later.”<sup>10</sup>

Milosevic biographer Louis Sell notes that the Bosnian Serb actions at Srebrenica were sanctioned by the higher nationalist authority in Serbia proper, “there is no doubt that [Serbian President Slobodan] Milosevic was aware of what was happening in Srebrenica and that he had the ability to compel Mladic to stop.”<sup>11</sup>

General Ratko Mladic’s elation and his proclamation that the “moment of revenge against the Turks had finally come” illustrate one example of the effects of the Kosovo Polje mythology. His elation at the Kosovo Polje battle anniversary celebration and reference to revenge for that event 606 years prior shows the effects of Serb aggression prosecuted with a vengeance in the emotive context of Serbian mythical history.

For the first half of the 1990s, from Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina to the Adriatic port cities of Croatia in the west, the Balkans was at war. Despite the best efforts of the European community, the UN, and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the last decade of the twentieth century was fraught with conflict and uneasy peace. Serbs fought Croats. Croats fought Muslims. Serbs fought Muslims. Nationalism in its most deadly form fueled cultural warfare with the objective of all parties to gain territory each claimed as essential to its national heritage and identity. The 1990s was the culmination of a reemergence and resurgence of a vengeful form of Serbian nationalism and cultural identity. At the foundation of that “nationalist hysteria” was a place called Kosovo Polje and an epic Serb story of a medieval battle between Serbian good and Muslim evil.<sup>12</sup> Known as the Kosovo Myth, the Serbian legend is the foundation of the Serbian national identity and serves as an interpretive lens through which Serbs view

history, people, and events resulting in a range of effects from shaping individual cultural awareness and celebration to fueling nationalist policies and war.

The Kosovo Myth was created as a result of a battle between a Serbian medieval alliance and the Ottoman Turks in 1389. The leader of the alliance, Prince Lazar Hrebeljonic, faced a Muslim army lead by Sultan Murad. At the end of the engagement, both leaders were dead. Conflicting reports exist on the actual details of the battle, but the majority of the evidence reveals an Ottoman victory. The Turks would eventually rule in the region for over five hundred years.

The Serb reaction to the loss of Lazar and his armies yielded an ethnic mythology that replaced the actual history. The Serbian version of history turns the engagement with the Turks into a religious epic of Serb sacrifice. The legend describes how God visited Prince Lazar on the eve of the battle in the form of a gray falcon and offered him the eternal kingdom of heaven. The price for the heavenly reward, however, was defeat and death for the Serb forces. The alternative offered to Lazar was a kingdom on earth and victory over the Ottomans. Multiple descriptions of the story show that Lazar chose the former and ensured a heavenly destination for the Serbian people forever. The legend, embodied in Serbian traditions of many forms since the battle, has survived to define an ethnic and national identity based on a historical lineage of victimization, violent struggle, justified revenge, and sacrifice for the national cause.<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of this research is to provide a detailed study of the history, creation, development, and effects of the Kosovo Polje epic mythology. The historical context leading up to the battle of Kosovo Polje and multiple accounts of the event provide the backdrop to study the reasons for the creation of the mythology. From its medieval



beginnings, it was developed, preserved, and cultivated by Serbian society. The effects of the mythology throughout Serbian history range from the formation of a cultural identity to a justification for war. The development, preservation, and effects continue today as the Kosovo Polje mythology remains a cornerstone of Serbian historical identity.

Additional questions key to the central issue are: What is the significance of this historic medieval battle? Why and how did the mythology evolve? By what means did the legend survive? What effect has it had on Serbs and their history? Is the mythology still evident today? How can we learn from this history?

The literature on the Kosovo epic mythology offers varying viewpoints on the myth's influence. Some scholars suggest that the myth was a useful tool used by politicians for justifying Serb actions. Scholar and human rights historian Julie Mertus suggests in *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War* that the political use of the relatively dormant myth combined with effective media and religious support enabled Slobodan Milosevic to rally Serb support for his political gain.<sup>14</sup> Veteran Balkan author Misha Glenny concurs that the mythology was simply an exploited political tool and adds that the Serb nationalism of the late 1980s and 1990s was not due to ancient or medieval-based hatreds but more recent motivation such as Croatian atrocities during World War II and the Serb desire for territorial acquisition.<sup>15</sup>

Concerning the strength of the legend and the negative aspects of the Serbian epic mythology, Veteran statesman, Ambassador Warren Zimmerman adds that the “defining historical event for all Serbs is the battle of Kosovo” and that it “defines their nationhood, their Christianity against the infidel, and their self-styled role as Europe’s protectors.”<sup>16</sup> Zimmerman adds that the negative effects of those perceptions define “Serbia’s tragic

flaw” which is “an obsession with its own history.”<sup>17</sup> Historian Michael Sells adds that the Serbian epic became so prevalent and accepted that it was “impervious to disproof.”<sup>18</sup> The danger of that widespread acceptance led to the motivation and justification of actions in the name of the Kosovo mythology, the results of which ranged from Serbian nationalist literature to church-sanctioned murder.

Historian Melissa Bokovoy suggests that the Kosovo mythology provides a “temporal or topographical memory site” or “framework in which to understand [the] past, present, and future.” It allows Serbs to “re-enact, both physically and symbolically, the experiences of their ancestors through wars for national unification.” About Kosovo itself, she adds the “Serbs have both deep and passionate ties to Kosovo and a pathological desire to give up their livelihoods and lives to defend it.”<sup>19</sup> Author Maja Mikula concludes that building a “collective identity” by “invoking mythical narratives from a pool of popular culture,” such as the Kosovo Polje mythology “functions to mobilize dangerous passions in the service of a ‘nationalist cause’ for present-day purposes.”<sup>20</sup> Ivan Colovic sees the mythology as an obstacle to political progress and fuel for “political rhetoric based on images and characters” that have no place in democratic political discourse. About its most disastrous effects, Colovic suggests that the ethno-centric myth provides its most avid believers a church-sponsored license to murder in the name of Kosovo Polje and its themes of violence and obligatory revenge.<sup>21</sup>

Positive opinions of the Kosovo Polje mythology range widely from countless Serbian nationalists and religious leaders to academics and authors. Author Sima Cirkovic suggests that the mythology serves a positive purpose as an “inspiration for courageous deeds and sacrifices” and is “widely used in condemning and stigmatizing

treason.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Alex Dragnich adds that the Kosovo epic illustrates to Serbs the “need to struggle, sacrifice, and maintain liberty” and is one of the “cornerstones of Serb consciousness.”<sup>23</sup>

Another group of authors argues that the Kosovo myth is at the forefront of Serb consciousness and continues to define the Serbian national identity. Thomas Emmert’s *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo 1389* illustrates how the Kosovo legacy is a consistent ingredient in the historical consciousness of the Serb people.<sup>24</sup> Slavic historian Nicholas Pappas in *Serbia’s Historical Heritage* suggests that the myth is required to motivate Serbs in times of struggle and sacrifice and serves as a cornerstone of Serb consciousness.<sup>25</sup> Christopher Bennett writes in *Yugoslavia’s Bloody Collapse: Causes, Course and Consequences* that belief in the Kosovo myth is not just limited to nationalists and that it represents a collective sense of what could have been had the Turks not ruled the region.<sup>26</sup>

Noel Malcom’s *Kosovo: A Short History* discusses how the Kosovo myth is a national ideology with the strength of a religion or cult providing a source of motivation for the Serbian people.<sup>27</sup> In *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation*, Laura Silber and Allan Little illustrate the religious parallel of the Kosovo epic noting a history of support from the Serbian Orthodox Church citing one bishop’s proclamation about the meaning of the name Kosovo, “beside the name of Christ, no other name is more beautiful or more sacred.”<sup>28</sup>

The common belief that the Kosovo epic mythology was cultivated throughout Serbian history is evident. Its epic and dramatic construct combined with supporting preservative factors that kept the idea alive enabled its use throughout history as the

driving force of Serbian national identity. This research provides a definitive and detailed study of how and why the Kosovo epic mythology was created and developed, its preservation, and, most importantly, the effect it has had on Serbian culture and the Balkan region.

The scope of the research ranges from the fourteenth century to the present in the Balkan region and focuses on the former Yugoslavia and, in particular, Serbia. The sources used include a broad array of materials, such as Serbian folklore, poetry, literature, and religious publications, as well as various media resources. Primary sources include interviews, newspaper articles, speeches, and eyewitness accounts of related critical events.

This study is organized using the following focus areas as they relate to the Kosovo Polje mythology: introduction, historical context, creation and development, preservation and cultivation, effects, and conclusion. After introducing the topic and thesis in chapter 1, the second chapter provides the historical context leading up to the Battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389 and various accounts of the battle itself. Chapter 3 shows how and why the mythology was created, its development, and how it was supported and nurtured by key preservative factors that have kept it alive from the medieval period to today. Chapter 4 addresses the effects of the Kosovo Polje mythology on the Serbian people and the region from simple first-order effects, such as individual attitudes and beliefs to second and third-order effects, such as cultural mobilization and nationalist political action. Finally, the concluding chapter addresses the state of the Kosovo Polje epic today in light of the latest developments in Kosovo, the likely role that the myth will

play in the future, and how it relates to other symbolic epic-based nationalist movements in the world today.

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<sup>1</sup>Ivan Colovic, *Politics of Identity in Serbia: Essays in Political Anthropology* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 66.

<sup>2</sup>Christos Pavloudis, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Southern Balkans* (Monterey, Naval Post Graduate School, 2002), 2.

<sup>3</sup>Florian Bieber, "Nationalist Mobilization and Stories of Serb Suffering," *Rethinking History* 6, no. 1 (2002): 98.

<sup>4</sup>Jan Willem Honig and Norbert Both, *Srebrenica: Record of a War Crime* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 71.

<sup>5</sup>Louis Sell, *Slobodan Milosevic and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 233.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>Honig, xviii.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 63-64.

<sup>11</sup>Sell, 233.

<sup>12</sup>Christopher Bennett, *Yugoslavia's Bloody Collapse: Causes, Course and Consequences* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 107.

<sup>13</sup>Thomas Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo, 1389* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 61-79.

<sup>14</sup>Julie A. Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 7.

<sup>15</sup>Misha Glenny, *The Fall of Yugoslavia: The Third Balkan War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 183.

<sup>16</sup>Warren Zimmerman, *Origins of a Catastrophe: Yugoslavia and its Destroyers* (New York: Times Books, 1996), 11.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>18</sup>Michael Sells, "Crosses of Blood: Sacred Space, Religion, and Violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina-The 2002 Paul Hanly Furfey Lecture," *Sociology of Religion* (fall 2003): 3.

<sup>19</sup>Bokovoy, Melissa, "Scattered Graves, Ordered Cemeteries--Commemorating Serbia's Wars of National Liberation, 1912-1918," in *Staging the Past: The Politics of Commemoration in Habsburg Central Europe, 1848 to Present*, ed. Maria Bacur, 236-238 (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2001)

<sup>20</sup>Maja Mikula, "Nationalism and the Rhetoric of Exclusion," *Southeast European Politics* 3, no. 1 (June 2003): 68.

<sup>21</sup>Colovic, 256.

<sup>22</sup>Sima Cirkovic, *The Serbs* (Maldon, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 85.

<sup>23</sup>Alex Dragnich, *Serbia's Historical Heritage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 30.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>26</sup>Bennett, 86-87.

<sup>27</sup>Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 79-80.

<sup>28</sup>Laura Silber and Allan Little, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (United States: Penguin Books, 1996), 72. Proclamation made by Orthodox Bishop Emilijan at a celebration marking the battle's [Kosovo Polje] anniversary in 1939.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORICAL REVIEW: ORIGINS OF THE KOSOVO POLJE MYTH

Let him who fails to join the battle of Kosovo fail in all he undertakes in his fields. Let his fields go barren of the good golden wheat, let his vineyards remain without vines or grapes.<sup>1</sup>

Prince Lazar on the eve of the Battle of Kosovo Polje

It is impossible to confirm the warning words of Prince Lazar spoken on the eve of the Battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389. No complete historical account exists confirming the words or many of the details surrounding the medieval event. The history of the Kosovo myth itself is a contradiction. It is a very real and meaningful event on the Serbian historical calendar, yet details of the actual battle are vague at best. Historians, scholars, religious leaders, and politicians have studied this battle extensively, yet it is still unclear who won or even if there was a winner. The myth that developed from the 1389 battle replaced the actual event, making it irrelevant to many who believe the mythology. This chapter explains the known historical context and events of the battle, explores the various accounts of the battle from that era, and investigates the character development and initial construct of the Kosovo myth.

#### Historical Context and Battle Accounts

The medieval lords in the Balkans in the second half of the fourteenth century were determined to keep the last vestige of their lands from the Ottomans. Separate kingdoms and despotates existed in the region consisting primarily of Zeta (Croatia), Serbia, Bosnia, and Dubrovnik with subportions of each ruled by relatives of the ruling families. The noble families constantly plotted, maneuvered, set up alliances, and broke

them to gain territory and prominence. In the central Serbian territory that included Kosovo, Prince, or *Knez*, Lazar Hrebeljonic ruled from his fortified city at Krusevac. Destined for Serbian glory and sainthood in the epic stories that would result from the battle, Lazar was a medieval lord working to gain territory and prominence in the region. Slavic historian Thomas Emmert offers the most complete study of *Knez* Lazar in *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo, 1389*. He describes Lazar as an “independent” in the medieval political scene who was educated in the court of Dusan. Lazar, “Emperor of Serbs and Greeks” from 1346-1355, rose through the ranks of nobility to be “a man of some influence” and in 1371 first adopted the title of “Prince.”<sup>2</sup> Lords of the time often gave themselves self-titles to gain additional acclaim. Lazar dubbed himself “Stefan Prince Lazar, pious and autocratic lord of Serbia and Danubian lands” in 1379 after a successful military campaign in the northern Balkans.<sup>3</sup> In the decade prior to battle of Kosovo Polje, Lazar ruled the most wealthy and powerful territory in Serbia and was able to unite the central and northern regions of Serbia and build alliances with other powerful lords to face the ever-present Ottoman threat.

Successful efforts to establish a Serbian Orthodox Church patriarchate in Kosovo and the resulting support from the church added to Lazar’s popularity and influence. In *Serbia: The History of an Idea*, Balkan historian Stevan Pavlowitch describes Lazar’s prosperous territory as “stabilized, bolstered by the support of the church and by important mineral resources.” Noting its prominence and popularity, he adds, “Lazar’s principality acted as a magnet for refugees from south and east, clerics, writers, artists, architects, Greeks, and Bulgars as well as Serbs. It became a thriving cultural center.”<sup>4</sup>



Author Thomas Emmert concurs with the assessment of Lazar's successful principality, labeling it as "one of the last Christian refuges in the Balkans" and notes the firm relationship it had with the Orthodox Church: "Lazar dotted his lands with churches and monasteries and made them financially strong by endowing them with rich landed estates."<sup>5</sup> Other rulers in the region included Djurdje Balsic, Lord of Zeta (Croatia); Vuk Brankovic, Lazar's son-in-law and Lord of Kosovo; and Tvrtko Kotromanic, ruler of Bosnia. Each had a vested interest to support the common goal to defend against Turkish aggression or risk becoming a subservient vassal of the Sultan.

The geography and resources of the area enticed Sultan Murad of the Ottoman Empire to attack further to the northwest. Thomas Emmert describes the strategic importance of Kosovo and the Central Balkans in the following way:

During the late middle ages the plain of Kosovo was one of the most important crossroads in the Balkan Peninsula. Linked in all directions with the rest of the peninsula, it was a strategically valuable prize to the conqueror of the central Balkan Peninsula--whether he be the Serb marching to the southeast or the Turk to the northwest. Moreover, the hills surrounding Kosovo contained the richest sources of mineral wealth in the entire peninsula. These factors combined to make Kosovo a particularly enviable target for Sultan Murad and the Ottoman Turks.<sup>6</sup>

Ottoman aggression into the region increased in the last thirty years of the fourteenth century. In Macedonia at the Battle of the Maritsa River, the Turks defeated a Serb contingent in 1371. Ten years later, Prince Lazar's forces first encountered and defeated Turkish forces at the Battle of Dubravica. Other encounters that decade between Serb and Ottoman forces occurred when Sultan Murad conducted raids into Serb territory to gather information and support for future conquest. Professor of Medieval History and author Sima Cirkovic illustrates how the Turks capitalized on these incursions and the internal feuding within the regional nobility, "they [the Ottomans] would become

involved in local conflicts at the invitation of the feuding Christian lords, familiarize themselves with the terrain, take what they wanted, and make those they aided their dependants.”<sup>7</sup> Thomas Emmert suggests that the Ottoman ambitions for expansion were not just motivated by territorial acquisition but possibly to avenge previous defeats. Prior to the Battle of Kosovo Polje, Prince Lazar and Sultan Murad battled on three occasions. In the final encounter before Kosovo Polje, a 1387 chronicle entry observed that, “Emperor Murad fled in front of Prince Lazar from the Toplica River at Plocnik.”<sup>8</sup> Emmert adds that these “early Turkish attacks were basically plundering expeditions organized to test the strength of the enemy forces, to exhaust those forces as much as possible, and to prepare for an eventual conquest of the area.”<sup>9</sup>

The final Ottoman conquest of the region came in 1389. Lazar and his contemporaries formed an alliance to counter that conquest. On 28 June 1389 (15 June in the Serbian Orthodox Julian Calendar), Sultan Murad marched north to the plain of Kosovo Polje. Stevan Pavlowitch provides an account of the event:

There, on the narrower field of Kosovo near Pristina, on 15 June (St. Guy’s day or Vidovdan), he [Sultan Murad] confronted a coalition of Serbian lords under Lazar, with contingents sent by King Tvrtko of Bosnia, and a diverse collection of knights and other warriors that included Albanians, Vlachs, Bulgars and sundry opponents of Sigismund of Luxemburg who sought refuge in Tvrtko’s realm. The battle was not as catastrophic as the later legend would suggest. Closer to a draw, it was nevertheless a great massacre in which both Lazar and Murad died, and which impressed contemporaries as a portentous event.<sup>10</sup>

Noel Malcolm suggests that the details of the event are lacking. In *Kosovo: A Short History* he notes that the *basic* facts, such as date, principles, and location are known, but “everything else about the battle of Kosovo is uncertain: who took part, how large the armies were, what the order of battle was, what the key turning-points in the fighting may have been, how and when Lazar and Murat [*sic*] met their deaths, and

whether, in the end, it should be characterized as a victory or a draw.”<sup>11</sup> Journalist Greg Campbell uses some literary license to fill in details and provides a more descriptive account of the engagement in *The Road to Kosovo*:

It was June, and the heat must have been oppressive, especially under the woven gold-encrusted chain mail and the weight of maces and battle axes. Prince Lazar’s knights were ready but jittery, facing the Turkish army alone on the empty field. . . . The battle lasted all day, but the Serbs were no match for the sultan’s men mounted on indefatigable Mongolian ponies. Under the cornflower sky, sweat and blood moistened the ground, and the din of battle must have carried for miles. . . . Flocks of large scavenger birds descended to eat the dead, forever earning the desolate plain the moniker Field of Blackbirds.<sup>12</sup>

While various historical accounts differ in detail and vary in the description of the events of the battle, early reports of the medieval engagement provide even more varying material from vague rumors of a battle to epic reports of a massive Christian victory or simple reports of the death of the sultan. Thomas Emmert has compiled a myriad of accounts ranging from rumors to dramatic detailed versions of the event. He summarizes the initial reports in this way:

In that time various accounts of what had occurred in the battle were disseminated in the West as far as Barcelona and Paris. The earliest documents indicate that the first news of the battle left the general impression that it was a victory for the Christian forces. . . . Only centuries later, under the influence of Turkish chronicles and histories, would Westerners begin to describe the Battle of Kosovo as an overwhelming Serbian defeat.<sup>13</sup>

With time, both Serbian and Turkish versions of the battle grew more dramatic and epic with religious overtones of sacrifice, martyrdom, and betrayal. These themes serve as the foundation of the Kosovo myth. The early Serbian accounts add to the other contemporary versions, focusing less on information and historical content and more on the themes of a spiritual victory. One of the earliest accounts from a late fourteenth century anonymous Serbian chronicle is less dramatic but contains a religious tone:

That one [Murad] marched on with his troops of unbelievers, and this one [Lazar] would not allow the destruction of godliness and the humiliation and the desecration of the relics and the cross. There was a battle between them, and in this battle the infidel tyrant fell by the sword in the middle of the battlefield together with many of his heathen soldiers; and one of his sons remained. And toward the end of this battle--I do not know what to say in truth about this, whether he [Lazar] was betrayed by one of his own or whether God's judgment was fulfilled in this--he [Bayezid] took him [Lazar] in his hands, and after much torture he himself cut off his venerable, God-fearing head.<sup>14</sup>

Another account by an anonymous fifteenth century writer from Dubrovnik (in present day Croatia) simply states that a battle occurred on a Tuesday at Kosovo with "great losses on both sides" between "the Bosnians and the Grand Turk."<sup>15</sup>

The Serbian accounts of the battle eventually became ultra-religious and established a cult worship of Prince Lazar. The actual history of the battle was replaced with religious-based mythology describing a battle between good and evil. In *Sluzba knezu Lazaru* (Office of Prince Lazar) written between 1390 and 1404, a medieval storyteller describes Lazar's martyrdom:

Like the all powerful Gideon  
You attacked the Persian horde  
Now allowing the temples of prayer and the  
holy vessels to be burned  
But desiring rather to die for them and to  
lay down your soul for them.  
And you shouted: Praise to your power, O Lord  
As they cut off your head.<sup>16</sup>

The descriptive and often graphic religious versions of the epic continued with comparisons of Lazar to Jesus Christ as a chosen "shepherd" and "savior" shedding his "holy blood" for the sake of his Serbian flock.<sup>17</sup>

Early Turkish accounts of the battle parallel other contemporary reports and contain similar themes of religious sacrifice, martyrdom, premonitions, and the death of a great leader. In his article, "The Battle of Kosovo: Early Reports of Victory and Defeat,"

Thomas Emmert describes the various Ottoman accounts as primarily focusing on an Ottoman victory and the assassination of Sultan Murad. He notes that the early reports had limited information and that a detailed Turkish account did not surface until early in the sixteenth century.<sup>18</sup> That account, written by Turkish historian Mehmed Nesri in 1512, was the first account with specific details of the battle and influenced subsequent Ottoman and Western accounts. Like Serbian accounts, it contains religious distinctions with the leader making a deal with God and sacrificing himself for his people:

The night before the battle while his soldiers slept, Murad prayed until dawn. He offered himself to God as a sacrifice for the faith and for the victory of his own men. The Christians, on the other hand, spent the evening in drunken revelry. . . . At dawn the next day the Turkish camp was alive with excitement as they placed themselves in battle formation. The Christians arranged themselves as well, although they were still drunk and talking nonsense. Lazar's army began to battle with a cannon volley which did not land close enough to do any damage. This was followed by an archery attack but the arrows also fell short of the Turkish lines. The Turks responded with cannon and arrows, and then suddenly the Christians surged against the Turkish left flank. They completely defeated it and pushed their way to the rear of that flank. At the moment of possible defeat, Bayezid rallied the Turkish right flank and began a counterattack against the Christians which ended in a victory for the Turks.<sup>19</sup>

The Nesri story continues with an elaborate drama of the assassination of Sultan Murad by "a heathen known as Milod Kobila [Milos Obilic]" and the Turkish leader's epic ascent into heaven.

Another Turkish chronicler of the early sixteenth century refers to a letter from Sultan Murad's son, Bayezid, written shortly after the battle that describes the assassination of the Ottoman leader as "God's will" and "whose life was fortunate and who died the death of a martyr." The chronicle describes the Sultan's dream on the eve of the battle foreshadowing a martyr's death for the leader at the hands of Milos Kobilic "who had arrived cunningly and under pretext, spoke out and said he wanted to become a

soldier of the victorious army.” He then “pulled out a poisoned knife which he had been hiding in his sleeve, and directed it fearlessly at the body of the most illustrious emperor, and wounding him seriously, quaffed his thirst with sherbet, the sweet water of martyrs.”<sup>20</sup>

The importance of comparing the early Turkish and Serbian versions is in the parallel themes and characters that developed and their influence on the evolution of the Kosovo myth. The common themes of death, sacrifice, martyrdom, religion, and heroic action are the foundation. Thomas Emmert concludes that the early texts contained the themes that created what he called “the cult of Kosovo”:

Already with these texts we can discern some of those themes which would give shape to the cult of Kosovo: the glory of pre-Kosovo Serbia; the necessity of struggle against tyranny; and the essential link between the Kosovo ethic and Christianity, which was expressed most clearly in the heroic ideal of self-sacrifice for the faith and for Serbia. The eulogists interpreted Lazar’s death as a victory in the religious sense of the word and used the New Testament symbol of the crown as the reward for the martyr’s sacrifice. Lazar as martyr for the faith and for Serbia would redeem his people with his sacrifice.<sup>21</sup>

#### Character Development and Construct of the Myth

The Kosovo myth evolved over time with additional dramatic details and characters to reinforce the original themes. The “assassination” event of Sultan Murad led to the creation of the heroic Milos Obilic character surrounded by a subplot of suspicion, disloyalty, slander, and heroism. In his article, “Milos Obilic and the Hero Myth,” Thomas Emmert provides reference to the first Serbian account of the assassination written in the fifteenth century in Constantine the Philosopher’s *Life of Despot Stefan Lazarevic*:

And there was a battle on a place called Kosovo which happened as follows. Among the soldiers who were fighting in the front lines was one of very noble

birth who was slandered before his lord by a certain jealous one and marked as disloyal. In order to demonstrate his loyalty as well as his braver, this one found the favorable time and rushed to the great leader himself as though he were a deserter, and they opened the way for him. And when he was near, he dashed forward at once and thrust a sword into that very haughty and terrible autocrat, and then himself fell there at their hands.<sup>22</sup>

The character Milos first appeared in a 1497 Chronicle by Konstantin Mihailovic written for the kings of Poland and Hungary. The chronicle tells of disloyalty and betrayal in the Serbian ranks countered by the passionate dedication and sacrifice shown by Milos. Historian Florian Bieber adds that the “historical existence of this assassin-hero is highly disputable, but he served as an archetypal national martyr figure, sacrificing himself for Serbia, and through the myth became an exemplary benchmark against which Serbian leaders had to justify their own accomplishments and rule.”<sup>23</sup>

Another character of the myth opposite the heroic Milos grew to represent the theme of betrayal and treachery: Vuk Brankovic. He was Lazar’s son-in-law and Lord of Kosovo, and served in the alliance against the Turks at the Battle of Kosovo Polje. Thomas Emmert notes the development of the antagonist: “Within a century . . . the legendary tradition of Kosovo would place all the blame for Serbia’s defeat on the shoulders of one man, Vuk Brankovic.”<sup>24</sup> Versions of Brankovic’s role range from fleeing the field of battle with his troops to slander against Milos Obilic. Florian Bieber notes that the traitorous character is necessary to contrast with the heroes of Lazar and Milos:

These two embodiments of heroic virtue are contrasted with a traitor figure. In the myth, one Vuk Brankovic is supposed to have betrayed the Serbian army before the fateful battle, this treason contributing to the subsequent defeat. It is convincingly demonstrated that the historical figure of Vuk Brankovic did not in fact betray the Christian forces . . . but nevertheless perfidy sits alongside self-sacrificial heroism as one of the principle themes of the myth.<sup>25</sup>

One of the more dramatic versions of the story published in 1601 by the influential chronicler from the Republic of Dubrovnik, Mavro Orbini, suggested a quarrel between the wives of Brankovic and Obilic as the basis of a treasonous accusation against Obilic. This accusation led Obilic to prove the accusation wrong and solidify his loyalty to Prince Lazar by carrying out his mission to kill Sultan Murad. Orbini's story explained how "Vuk never missed one opportunity to slander Milos before his father-in-law" and how Brankovic falsely warned Lazar "to watch Milos because he should know that he [Milos] was secretly plotting with the Turks to betray him."<sup>26</sup> A later rendition from the eighteenth century tells of a disloyal Vuk Brankovic urging retreat in the face of the Ottomans and how Lazar "said that anyone who did not love the mercy of God should flee with the disloyal and merciless Vuk Brankovic." The version also blames Vuk for the Serbian defeat stating, "They [loyal Serb forces] showed their courage and would have defeated the tsar's [Sultan Murad's] whole army if it had not been for the treason of Vuk Brankovic."<sup>27</sup>

The foundation for the Kosovo myth is evident with the characters of Prince Lazar, Milos Obilic, and Vuk Brankovic identified and the epic themes established as pillars of the myth. The few historical facts that remain are eclipsed by the dramatic details of the legend that has evolved. History was replaced by the mythology. Many in the Balkan region believed and still believe the myth as truth. Florian Bieber suggests it is "a reality seen through the prism of the Kosovo myth."<sup>28</sup> She dissects the myth and identifies three key distinct "dimensions" that facilitate its remembrance:

First . . . the myth became part of the commemorative calendar of the nation; an event ritually remembered in particular ways once a year. . . . A second aspect of the myth is the claim to Kosovo. The insistent remembrance of the battle, in



conjunction with the importance of Kosovo for the medieval Serbian kingdom, serves to ground a territorial claim irrespective of the facts of population distribution in the region and impervious to subsequent historical developments. Third, the myth establishes a historical continuity between the contemporary Serbian nation and the ‘Serbs’ of the Middle Ages, suggesting a perennial nation.<sup>29</sup>

Noting the effect of an epic myth on perceptions of history, Bieber adds, “In blurring the distinction between the past and present, they [national myths] equate current leaders such as Slobodan Milosevic with previous Serbian rulers and group current enemies together with past ones.”<sup>30</sup>

This brief look at the historical context of the Battle of Kosovo Polje and the initial development of the epic story provides a basis to delve further into the Kosovo Polje mythology. As noted, the actual details and battle accounts are not as important as the stories that developed from them. Those stories had common themes and characters and survived through various means over the centuries of foreign rule. The next chapter addresses the reasons why the epic story evolved and how it was nurtured, cultivated, and employed for over five centuries.

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<sup>1</sup>Julie A. Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 185.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo, 1389* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 31.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>4</sup>Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Serbia: The History of an Idea* (New York: New York City University Press, 2002), 9.

<sup>5</sup>Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo 1389*, 32.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 40-41.

<sup>7</sup>Sima Cirkovic, *The Serbs* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Inc., 2004), 82.

- <sup>8</sup>Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo 1389*, 39.
- <sup>9</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup>Pavlowitch, 9-10.
- <sup>11</sup>Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 61.
- <sup>12</sup>Greg Campbell, *The Road to Kosovo: A Balkan Diary* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 149-150.
- <sup>13</sup>Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosov, 1389*, 61.
- <sup>14</sup>Ibid., 73-74.
- <sup>15</sup>Ibid., 101.
- <sup>16</sup>Ibid., 65.
- <sup>17</sup>Ibid., 66.
- <sup>18</sup>Thomas Emmert, *The Battle of Kosovo: Early Reports of Victory and Defeat*, 28 February 2002, 4 [The Society for Medieval Military History Home Page] available from [//www.deremilitari.org/RESOURCES/ARTICLES/emmert.htm](http://www.deremilitari.org/RESOURCES/ARTICLES/emmert.htm); Internet; accessed on 7 October 2004.
- <sup>19</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup>Idris Bitlisi, *The Firman of Bayezid*, Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Raska and Prizren Homepage; available from [//www.Kosovo.com/ibitlisi.html](http://www.Kosovo.com/ibitlisi.html); Internet; accessed on 13 September 2004.
- <sup>21</sup>Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo, 1389*, 75.
- <sup>22</sup>Thomas Emmert, "Milos Obilic and the Hero Myth," *Journal of The North American Society for Serbian Studies* 10 (1996): 3 (ISSN 0742-2330); [The Centre for Peace in the Balkans Website] available from [http://www.balkanpeace.org/library/fa\\_2000/obilic.html](http://www.balkanpeace.org/library/fa_2000/obilic.html); Internet; accessed on 8 October, 2004.
- <sup>23</sup>Florian Bieber, "Nationalist Mobilization and Stories of Serb Suffering," *Rethinking History* 6, no. 1 (2002): 96.
- <sup>24</sup>Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo, 1389*, 85.
- <sup>25</sup>Bieber, 2-3.
- <sup>26</sup>Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo, 1389*, 106.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 118, 119.

<sup>28</sup>Bieber, 102.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 96.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 98.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE CREATION, DEVELOPMENT, AND PRESERVATION OF THE KOSOVO POLJE MYTHOLOGY

Wipe away Kosovo from the Serb mind and soul and we are no more . . . if there had been no battle at Kosovo the Serbs would have invented it for its suffering and its heroism.<sup>1</sup>

Milovan Djilas, former member of Tito's inner circle

The previous chapter set the historical stage for the creation of the Kosovo mythology. From that historical context, the next step is to study why and how the myth developed, and how it was supported and nurtured as it moved from the psychological and social context to the political context. This chapter addresses these areas in two sections: The Psychology of Suffering and Cultivating the National Myth.

#### Psychology of Suffering

Milovan Djilas' quote suggests a particular need of the "Serb mind and soul"; a psychological and emotional requirement based on a tragic, heroic, and suffering theme. Why did he suggest that Serbs would have invented a similar story if the mythology surrounding the Battle of Kosovo Polje did not already exist? Is there a Serb need to feel the emotions caused by thoughts of Kosovo? A Serb himself, Djilas obviously felt that the Serbs need some emotional source that evokes feelings of heroism and suffering, but that is only half of the need. Along with heroism and suffering, a story must provide a person--the antihero--who is responsible for the suffering and who creates heroes and victims. The Kosovo epic mythology is the source that provides those feelings and is the foundation of the Serbian national identity. Described by some as the cornerstone of Serb consciousness, the "Kosovo orientation," as defined by Serbian historian Radovan

Samardzic, is a personality trait: “Nations have their metaphysical core, with some this is impulsive and with others it is hidden, sometimes even powerless. . . . The Kosovo orientation is not [only] a national idea, but also a trait of character which makes a Serb a Serb.”<sup>2</sup>

A major facet of this Serb “trait of character” is the theme of suffering and victimhood. It is evident in all forms of the epic Kosovo story and is a recurring theme in Serbian history. This victimhood is a multi-faceted component of the myth. On one hand, Serbs are seen as victims on the medieval field of battle gallantly losing the day to the Ottomans. More specifically, Prince Lazar, Milos Obilic and others were the betrayed and martyred victims at the hands of the Ottomans, sacrificing their lives and reserving the kingdom of heaven for the Serbian people. In another facet of victimhood, Serbs are the abandoned defenders of Europe and Christendom, forgotten by the rest of the continent for checking the Turkish onslaught and then suffering for five hundred years under occupation. This sense of abandonment can be seen in the 1894 quarterly journal, *The Century*, in which the Serbian-American inventor, writer, and eccentric, Nikola Tesla, wrote about the famous Serb poet Zmai Iovan Iovanovich. In this pro-Serbian article, he noted the victimization of Serbia: “the Servian [*sic*] nation was plunged into abject slavery, after the fatal battle of 1389 at the Kosovo Polje, against the overwhelming Asiatic hordes. Europe can never repay the great debt it owes to the Servians [*sic*] for checking, by the sacrifice of their own liberty, the barbarian influx.”<sup>3</sup> Many scholars equate the Serb identity with that of the “eternal victim.” Balkans scholar Julie Mertus writes of the dangers of a victim component of an identity:

Our identities as individuals and as members of groups are defined through the telling and remembering of stories. Real or imagined, these stories shape our understanding of ourselves as heroes, martyrs, triumphant conquerors and humiliated victims. The most dangerous identity is that of a victim. Once we see ourselves as victims, we can clearly identify an enemy. Steeped in our own victimhood, we no longer feel bound by moral considerations in becoming perpetrators.<sup>4</sup>

Author Brogdan Denitch proposes that the Serbs have a “pathological image of national suffering” drawing conclusions from a combination of national myths and historical facts resulting in a “fatal” brand of nationalism that led to the destruction of the Yugoslav Federation.<sup>5</sup> Historian Florian Bieber also identifies the dangers of a self perception of victimhood on a national scale: “the [Kosovo] myth with its celebration of loss proved instrumental for resentment-based nationalism. The self perception of victimhood in Serbian nationalism provided a forceful motivation for mobilization for the wars [of the 1990s].”<sup>6</sup>

Emotions tied to a symbolic event such as the battle of Kosovo Polje can unify people, cultures, and nations as well as tear them apart. Historian and journalist Robert Kaplan proposes that Kosovo Polje is a pillar upon which a Serbian “crowd symbol” rests and defines Serbia as nation.<sup>7</sup> Kaplan borrows the term “crowd symbols” in his book *Balkan Ghosts* from a psychological theory developed by Bulgarian-born Nobel laureate Elias Canetti. His “crowd symbol” is a nation’s most memorable epic story that evokes the strongest emotions upon which the national identity is based. For the English, the crowd symbol is the sea, for the French it is the revolution, and for people of the Jewish faith it is the exodus from Egypt through the desert. Kaplan adds that “the psychologically closed, tribal nature of the Serbs, Croats, and others makes them as suited to crowd symbols as the Jews, and more so than the English and the Germans.”<sup>8</sup>

The evolution of Kosovo Polje as a Serb “crowd symbol” began shortly after the battle in 1389. Balkans historian Thomas Emmert discusses the medieval beginnings of Serbia’s “crowd symbol” and also suggests that there was a need for such an epic due to the “feeling of despair [that] permeated Lazar’s Serbia following the prince’s death in 1389 and Milica’s [Lazar’s wife] surrender to the Turks the next year. Conscious of the need to combat pessimism in Serbia and to provide hope for a brighter future, monastic figures wrote eulogies and sermons in praise of Lazar in which they interpreted the events of this troubled period for their own generation.”<sup>9</sup>

In another work by Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo 1389*, he identifies the Battle of Kosovo Polje as the Serb nation’s “Golgotha,” or a place or event of great suffering and agony derived from the hill of the same name where Jesus suffered on the cross. Emmert adds that the Golgotha of Kosovo “served as a reservoir of spiritual strength for the Serbs and inspired them through the long period of Ottoman rule. Ultimately it was an inspiration for revenge and rebirth.”<sup>10</sup> Author Dusan Batakovic, a Serb, concurs with the inspirational nature of the story and adds that the Kosovo “oath” or “pledge” has been a positive influence on generations of Serbs:

The oath of Prince Lazar, derived from the New Testament tradition of martyrdom that it was better to obtain freedom in the celestial empire than to live humiliated in the oppression of the earthly kingdom, became during the centuries of Turkish rule, the key of Serbian national ideology. The Kosovo oath . . . became the basis upon which the Serbs built the cult of resisting and not accepting injustice. . . . Many a generation of Serbs received its first notions of itself and the world by listening to folk poems describing the Kosovo sufferings: the apocalyptic fall of Serbian Empire, the tormentous [*sic*] death of Prince Lazar, the betrayal of Vuk Brankovic, [and] the heroism of Milos Obilic.<sup>11</sup>

With multiple generations of Serb culture drawn together by the Kosovo epic mythology, a set of what Julie Mertus describes as “national truths” developed. Mertus

suggests that cultures have a set of “national truths” that affect behavior. These truths are what people believe to be true and may, in fact, not be factual at all. Competing cultures each have their own national truths that are closely linked to their identity. She recognizes the problem when leaders manipulate “particularly malignant strains of national truths, aided by inaccurate and distorted media reports and deteriorating economic and social conditions” as was the case with the Serbs and Slobodan Milosevic in the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> She adds, “facts are rarely the driving force of human behavior. In terms of their bearing on ordinary human lives, experience and myth are far more persuasive and influential than factual truth.”<sup>13</sup> She applies that theory to the Balkan region, “the people of the region, however, pattern their behavior around what *they* [Mertus’ italics] believe to be true, based not on what some outside ‘expert’ writes but on their own personal experiences and on the myths perpetuated by the local media and other popular storytellers.”<sup>14</sup> Thomas Emmert further describes the role of the Kosovo myth in shaping “national truths” and how it defined the Serbian view of history:

Over the centuries the legendary and poetic interpretations of the Battle of Kosovo and the martyred prince evolved to become the core of the cult of Kosovo and its unique ethos. This helped to shape the historical consciousness of the Serbian people. . . . Kosovo became the symbol of Serbia’s future liberation. For centuries, the legacy of Kosovo would inspire Serbian people with the examples of sacrifice, bravery, and determined opposition to foreign domination.<sup>15</sup>

The assessment of literature concerning the development of the Kosovo mythology provides reasons about the development that relate to its influence on Serbian culture. Born out of a defeat it assuaged the actual hardships of peasant life and addressed the perceived suffering of Serbdom as a whole in the Serbian psyche. Some suggest that it was embedded as a personality trait that served as the basis for the Serbian cultural identity. Opinions vary on the resulting effects ranging from perpetual victimhood fueling



vengeance to a noble source of personal strength with all the qualities of a just and honorable heritage. The interpretation at the individual and cultural levels determines the outcome when the emotions surrounding the Kosovo mythology are channeled into action. Therein lies the answer to the positive or negative effects of the epic that are addressed in the next chapter.

### Cultivating the National Myth

The survival of the Kosovo mythology from the early eulogies of the Serb Orthodox Church to the Balkan battlefields in the 1990s was due to several key preservatives that maintained the idea. Key media that preserved and cultivated the Kosovo Polje mythology were oral folklore tradition, epic poetry and literature, and the Serbian Orthodox Church. As with many cultural stories, epics usually begin by word of mouth story telling over the course of generations and progress to the written word and eventual publication in literature. The Kosovo Polje mythology followed this progression and continues in all forms today.

The cultivation of the Kosovo epic mythology began by oral tradition. Historian Nada Milosevic-Djordjevic notes in the book, *The History of the Serbian Culture*, that the Serbian oral tradition is a mixture of previous traditions and regional influences that was “developed further as it defended itself from oriental influences, while accepting elements of those influences at the same time.”<sup>16</sup> Both song and verse were a common form of folklore after the Battle of Kosovo Polje. Milosevic-Djordjevic adds that from “the end of the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century, collections of songs appeared, along with collections of stories and other creative forms; some of these works are the very epitome of artistic perfection. Entire collections of written material indicate the great

metrical and thematic development of the oral tradition in poetry and a wide variety of prose forms as well.”<sup>17</sup> From his personal experience in Yugoslavia, former Eastern Europe U.S. Foreign Service Officer Louis Sell notes the genesis of Serbian national identity began with the oral tradition of the Kosovo Polje story. He writes that, “memories of the Kosovo battle, and indeed the whole concept of Serbia as a nation, were preserved through a remarkable tradition of oral folk poems . . . passed on by generations of illiterate peasant bards.”<sup>18</sup>

From the basis of the oral tradition, Serbian epic literature developed in the late fifteenth century. The Kosovo epic was a common theme that was consistent throughout the centuries of epic poetry. Milosevic-Djordjevic notes that the many forms of epic literature contained the common Kosovo thread. About the impact and importance of the theme, he adds that “the battle is an ideal event for the formation of epic poetry . . . allusions to folk literature and the records of the texts in the fifteenth and sixteenth century are characterized by a wealth of forms and a wide variety of themes. They are accompanied by a unique epic theme related to events at the Battle of Kosovo (1389).”<sup>19</sup>

Travelers through the Balkan region often documented their journeys and are a strong source of information concerning the development and distribution of the Kosovo epic story. Milosevic-Djordjevic provides a sixteenth-century example that supports the theory that the Kosovo epic was prevalent across the region and helped to assuage the challenges of Turkish occupation:

Benedikt Kuripecic, a Slovene by birth, was traveling these parts between 1530 and 1531 as an interpreter for an Austrian emissary. In his Travelogue, he narrates a part of the Kosovo legend, mentions the epic songs about Milos Obilic in places which were far from the actual events (in Bosnia and Croatia), and he even noted the creation of new songs. In a time when the Turks were occupying the major

towns of the Serbian lands, Kuripecic produced the documentation about the poetry and legends as a form of defence against the pressure of the Ottoman invasion.<sup>20</sup>

Slavic historian Nicholas Pappas adds that epic poetry specifically was a source of strength for the occupied Serbian people and the “epic poems (*pjesme*) kept alive the greatness of medieval Serbia and the spirit of resistance among the Serbs in Kosovo . . . Serb epic poetry helped to develop a Serbian national consciousness in modern times separate from that of the Greeks or other Balkan Orthodox.”<sup>21</sup>

The two major pillars in the history of Serbian oral tradition and epic poetry that most influenced and contributed to the preservation and cultivation of the Kosovo myth were Vuk Karazdic’s compilation work, *Serbian National Songs*, beginning in 1815 and the 1847 Petar Petrovic Njegos poem, *The Mountain Wreath*. A key figure in Balkan literary culture, known by some as the “Father of Serbian Culture,” Karazdic published volumes of Serbian epic poetry, stories, and songs beginning in 1815.<sup>22</sup> A reformer of the Serbian language as well as poet, Karazdic devoted his life to gathering and documenting the Serbian oral tradition and epic poetry rich with references to the Kosovo epic. Historian Alexander Greenawalt identifies the compilation as “the first systematic attempt to document the folk tradition” that eventually becomes known as the “Kosovo Cycle.”<sup>23</sup>

As an example of a Kosovo Cycle poem, Milosevic-Djordjevic describes a performance of the famous Serbian epic poem, *The Death of the Jugovics' Mother*, published with a compilation of Serbian epic poetry in 1814. This poem illustrates all the cultural themes that are part of the myth : religion, suffering, anguish, and death resulting from a mother’s loss of her sons and husband during the battle of Kosovo Polje. It begins

as a prayer with “Lord of Hosts . . . unto God prays the aged mother” with references to God throughout. With elements of fantasy and suffering, the poem describes the mother’s vision through the “keen eyes of the falcon” as she discovers here nine dead sons and husband on the field of Kosovo:

At their sides nine battle-spears are lying,  
On the spears are perched nine keen-eyed falcons,  
Round the spears stand nine good battle-horses,  
And nine lions lie beside their masters.  
And there roar their grief the nine grim lions,  
And there mourn the nine good battle-horses,  
And nine keen-eyed falcons scream in sorrow.

Graphic details of violence depicting blood and death are not uncommon in Kosovo poetry. Here the author portrays ravens delivering a severed hand to the suffering mother:

Bloody are their wings up to the shoulders,  
From their beaks the blood-flecked foam is falling.  
'Tis a hero’s severed hand they carry,  
On the hand a golden ring is shining.

The poem finishes with the image of the mother’s pain and resulting death as “the mother’s heart swelled big with anguish, swelled the mother’s heart, and broke with sorrow.”<sup>24</sup> Milosevic-Djordjevic describes the poem as a “heroic tragedy of a mother who bravely faces the death of her husband and all of her sons” overcome with pain and suffering as black ravens drop her son’s right hand in her lap that was “plucked on Kosovo bare!”<sup>25</sup> The characteristics of *The Death of the Jugovics' Mother* are consistent with other examples of epic poetry: long, religious, and sorrowful with undertones of sacrifice, death, and anguish.

The pinnacle of Serbian epic poetry emerged in 1847 with the publication of *The Mountain Wreath* by Petar Petrovic Njegos. Njegos, a Montenegrin Bishop, poet, and

prince who championed the South Slavs, wrote the lengthy poem in the traditional decasyllabic fashion. This form of poetry rarely rhymes and contains exactly ten syllables on each line with breaks after the fourth syllable.<sup>26</sup> Although not directly about the battle of Kosovo Polje, it contains multiple references to Kosovo and Serbian heroes Prince Lazar and Milos Obilic. Slavacist and author Vasa D. Mihailovic translated *The Mountain Wreath* and describes the basis of the work as “his [Njegos’] own renditions of the overriding theme of Serbian folk epic poetry--the struggle against the Turkish occupation or the threat thereof, and the eventual liberation from it. . . . It epitomizes the spirit of the Serbian people kept alive for centuries; indeed, there is no other literary work with which the Serbs identify more. . . . [I]t gave Njegos an opportunity to formulate his own philosophical views, views which also reflect and further inspire those of his nation.”<sup>27</sup> Thomas Emmert identified the following passage from *The Mountain Wreath* that expressed Njegos’ resentment of Ottoman rule and embodied the spirit of the Kosovo epic “to guide new generations in the struggle for freedom and liberation” and to teach that “Serbs were to understand that the noblest of acts was to kill the foreign tyrants.”<sup>28</sup>

O cursed Kosovo supper,  
 If only fortune had poisoned all those leaders  
 And wiped away their traces,  
 If only Miloš himself had remained in the center  
 With both his blood brothers,  
 Then today a Serb would be a Serb!...  
 O Miloš, who doesn't envy you?  
 You are the victim of a noble feeling,  
 An all powerful military genius,  
 A dreadful thunder that smashes crowns!  
 The greatness of your knightly soul  
 Surpasses the immortal feats  
 Of wonderful Sparta and great Rome;  
 All their brilliant chivalric deeds  
 Are overshadowed by your proud muscles.

What can Leonidas do, and Scaevola  
When Obilic stands on the field of battle?  
These muscles with one blow  
Destroyed a throne and shook hell.<sup>29</sup>

Njegos' poetry captured the sentiment of Serbs longing for a glorious heroic past and a return to honor through struggle and action against the Ottomans. This excerpt from *The Mountain Wreath*, is analogous to the Last Supper and has a martial tone complete with the common themes of nobility, heroes, and assassination. Embellishing the epic, Njegos described the hero Milos as an immortal military genius on the field of battle assassinating the Sultan with one muscular blow that "shook hell," clearly establishing Milos Obilic as the heroic rock of Serbian lore.

From the fifteenth century through its peak in the nineteenth century, the Serbian oral tradition and epic literature not only preserved the tradition of the Kosovo epic, but also grew popular elsewhere in Europe, particularly in Austria, Germany, France, and Hungary. Milosevic-Djordjevic notes its surprisingly widespread distribution beginning in medieval times and the importance of epic poetry in keeping Serbian society together: "With the demise of the Serbian medieval state, the historical traditions and epic poetry became the only integrating factor for the Serbian people, the most important elements of the communication system in the culture, and a means of spiritual survival and resistance to assimilation." He added that the epic poetry "ensured the continuation of collective memory" and gained European popularity and recognition as travelers "gave particular attention to this phenomenon in their invaluable records of the life and customs of the population."<sup>30</sup>

Parallel to, and in concert with, the Serbian oral tradition and epic literature, the Serbian Orthodox Church is perhaps the most consistent cultivator of the Kosovo

mythology. Support from the church began with the eulogies of the Serbian dead in 1389 and continues today in the publications and websites of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Since the late fourteenth century, the church has nurtured the Serbian collective memory of Kosovo in multiple ways ranging from sermons and teachings to shrines and the deification of Prince Lazar. Left with a limited authority to self-rule under the Ottomans, the Serbian Orthodox Church, with its Patriarchate in the town of Pec in Kosovo, was often the only source of information or inspiration for the Serbian people. Nicholas Pappas adds, “with the separate legal system of the Serbian Orthodox Church, [it] allowed for a limited degree of autonomy in many areas. This limited autonomy gave the Serbs the wherewithal to retain a religious/cultural identity among the common people of their past, through the church, epic poetry, and folk customs.”<sup>31</sup> Pappas also suggests that “the church preserved the synaxary and feastdays which memorialized the great rulers and holy men of medieval Serbia and linked them with succeeding generations of Serbs. In this way every Serb could identify with Sts. [Saints] Sava, Stefan Nemanja, Dusan the Mighty, and Lazar the Martyr.”<sup>32</sup>

Journalist and Balkans historian Christopher Bennett adds that the Serbian Orthodox Church was suitably located in Kosovo and “was thus able to nurture a distinct Serb national consciousness in all Orthodox communities during the Ottoman rule, based around legends of former rulers from Serbia’s medieval past, most of whom were canonized and worshipped.”<sup>33</sup> Thomas Emmert illustrates the way in which the church has been a caretaker of the Kosovo mythology for centuries: “The monks of Ravanica [Lazar’s memorial monastery] remained faithful to the cult of their founder until 1690 when the few surviving monks left the monastery with the remains of St. Lazar to join the

great Serbian migration to southern Hungary. . . . [T]he cult of Lazar as saint and martyr was rekindled in its new, northern home.”<sup>34</sup>

The Kosovo legend itself is inherently religious. It contains what historian Noel Malcolm terms as the “Kosovo Covenant.”<sup>35</sup> The Kosovo Covenant refers to the choice Prince Lazar made to sacrifice victory on the battlefield in favor of a spiritual victory winning the kingdom of heaven for the Serbian people forever. At times analogous to the last supper, the covenant story portrays Lazar and his Serbian lords dining on the eve of the battle where Lazar speaks of his covenant with God and reassures his subordinates that “it is better to die than to live in shame.” As Malcolm points out, the Kosovo Covenant is present throughout Serbian oral tradition and its earliest known form began in the church with “a liturgical text which was probably influenced by the folk singers.”<sup>36</sup> Scenes depicting this “last supper” and other aspects of the Kosovo legend were widespread in the religious art of the time. Beginning in the late fourteenth century, the Serbian Orthodox religious iconic art contained frescos depicting the epic. Scenes showing a heroic Prince Lazar with saintly halo, cross, and sword, along with members of his loyal Serb defenders of Christendom, were common religious themes through the twentieth century.<sup>37</sup>

With the solid foundation built by the Serbian Orthodox Church and epic culture, the church cultivated and utilized the Kosovo mythology in what some historians term as religious nationalism. As mentioned earlier, author and journalist Michael Sells noted that religious nationalism “emerged in Serbia around the issue of Kosovo” in the nineteenth century.<sup>38</sup> He provides an example of that nationalism by sighting the “re-imagination” of the Kosovo epic as well as its deification as a story:



Religious nationalists solidified their hold over Serbian society and imagination. In the mid 19th century . . . revolutionaries fighting Ottoman rule had re-imagined the Battle of Kosovo as the central point in the history of Serbia, the “Serbian Golgotha,” the crucifixion of the Serb people. Lazar, the Serb killed at the Battle, was presented at a Last Supper surrounded by twelve knight disciples, one of whom was a traitor, another of whom (Milos Obilic) later avenged Lazar by killing the sultan. A Mary Magdalene figure, the Maiden of Kosovo, administered to the fallen Serb warriors.<sup>39</sup>

Historian Bogdan Denitch confirms the role of the church “has been all but synonymous with Serbian nationalism” and that both “are bound to the mythology of the Kosovo cycle of epic poems.”<sup>40</sup>

The church holidays also maintain Serbian collective memory about Kosovo with annual events and rituals including Vidovdan, or St. Vitus Day, on 28 June (15 June of the Julian calendar used by the church). The anniversary is named after St. Guy (“Vid” in Slavonic languages), a third century martyr from southern Italy. He is essentially a patron saint of suffering. Historian Stevan Pavlowitch clarifies the odd role of St. Vitus who “is invoked as the patron of those who suffer from epilepsy and nervous disorders, and from the bites of mad dogs and snakes. Through no fault of his own, he has been burdened for too long with the fate of Serbia.”<sup>41</sup> The ritual associated with the anniversary includes a tour of Prince or Saint Lazar’s bones from the Ravanica monastery (founded by Prince Lazar) to the holy shrines of the Serb-populated territories and return. Michael Sells notes that the Kosovo Polje anniversary grew in popularity over the years and “with each decade the national and mythic importance of Vidovdan increased.”<sup>42</sup>

A major Vidovdan celebration sponsored by the church in 1889 on the five hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo Polje illustrated the vast popularity of the event in the midst of Ottoman-occupied Serbia. Thomas Emmert describes the commemoration that illustrated the elevation of the Kosovo characters to saintly status

and the never-ending quest to restore the medieval Serbian empire: “The metropolitan of the Serbian Church delivered the sermon, which was inspired primarily by the epic tradition of Kosovo. He concluded his brief remarks with a prayer beseeching Lazar and all the martyrs of Kosovo to intercede with God and seek His help in restoring the Serbian Empire and unifying the whole Serbian nation.”<sup>43</sup>

The significance of Vidovdan and the Kosovo Polje battle anniversary is emphasized with other historic Serbian events that occurred on that date. Bosnian Serb nationalist Gavrilo Princip assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28 June in 1914. In 1921 on 28 June, the Yugoslav state of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes received its constitution. In 1948, Stalin used the date for emphasis when he expelled Yugoslavia from the Eastern Bloc on 28 June, and in 1991 the Balkan wars began a few days prior to the anniversary. Ironically, in 2001 Slobodan Milosevic surrendered to authorities of The Hague on Vidovdan. Florian Bieber suggests the connection of these events to the epic myth was not a coincidence: “Conscious human choices to position these events in relation to a quasi-mystical national framework obviously determined their timing. But their cumulative effect has none the less been to reinforce and reaffirm the national significance of Vidovdan.”<sup>44</sup>

As mentioned in the introduction, historian Laura Silber illustrated the significance the Serbian Orthodox Church applies to Kosovo in the 1939 quote from a Serbian bishop, “Beside the name of Christ, no other name is more beautiful or more sacred.”<sup>45</sup> Continuing its nationalist cause, the Serbian Orthodox Church was an active player throughout the twentieth century in Serbia. Author Florian Bieber notes that “the church drew heavily on the myth of Serbian suffering and heroism connected with the

Kosovo cycle” and again attempted to influence the situation in Kosovo in the 1980s.<sup>46</sup>

Twenty-one Serbian priests presented an appeal proclaiming the existence of the ongoing historical Serbian struggle and that Kosovo had been taken from Serbia through the pro-Kosovo Albanian policies of Tito’s regime:

The Serbian nation has been struggling from the Kosovo Battle 1389 up to this day for remembrance [28 June 1989] and to protect its own identity, to protect the meaning of its existence from its enemies. It is ironically at the point in time at which one might have thought that the battle is won that Kosovo ceases to be ours and we stop being what we were. And all this without war, during a time of peace and freedom!<sup>47</sup>

Michael Sells adds that the role of religious nationalism was still strong in the 1990s, “By the time the violence reached BH [Bosnia-Herzegovina], the Serb forces were initiated into killing on the basis of “religion identity.” The institutions and symbols of Christianity played a crucial role in providing a framework from which such bloodshed made sense and was not only justified, but was an act of sacrificial redemption.”<sup>48</sup> Sells continues with a description of one of the most disturbing accounts that shows the influence of the Kosovo epic on Serb nationalists:

In BH, Serb militiamen memorized verses of Njegos glorifying the destruction of Muslim populations and monuments. They were blessed before and after their acts by Serb clergy amid references to Lazar. After Serb nationalists cleansed a town, they would rename the streets after heroes from Serb national mythology and receive medals in the name of those same heroes. . . . the Serb Orthodox nationalists who had alleged that Albanians were systematically destroying Serb heritage in Kosovo enacted precisely the same kind of program against others. The campaign was systematic.<sup>49</sup>

The pattern of revival, employment, and cultivation of the Kosovo Polje mythology creates a lifecycle that enables the myth to remain evident and usable. The cycle is a pattern of renewal, employment, action, development and cultivation, and then returns to renewal when needed or “triggered” again. It begins with the originating event

that serves as the foundation for the epic story or myth. It is developed and cultivated by society continuously and then renewed by an event or “trigger” situation. The myth is then employed as a theme or basis for action and is again further developed, re-cultivated, and “maintained” by society for future use. The order of the cycle may be interrupted if one of the steps is unsuccessful, but the development and cultivation of the myth is consistent throughout and may vary in degree from a relatively dormant state to the forefront of consciousness. The effects resulting from the employment or action part of the cycle vary as well ranging from a family memorial celebration to a platform for nationalist action and civil war. The following figure illustrates the “lifecycle” of a myth, such as the Kosovo Polje legend.

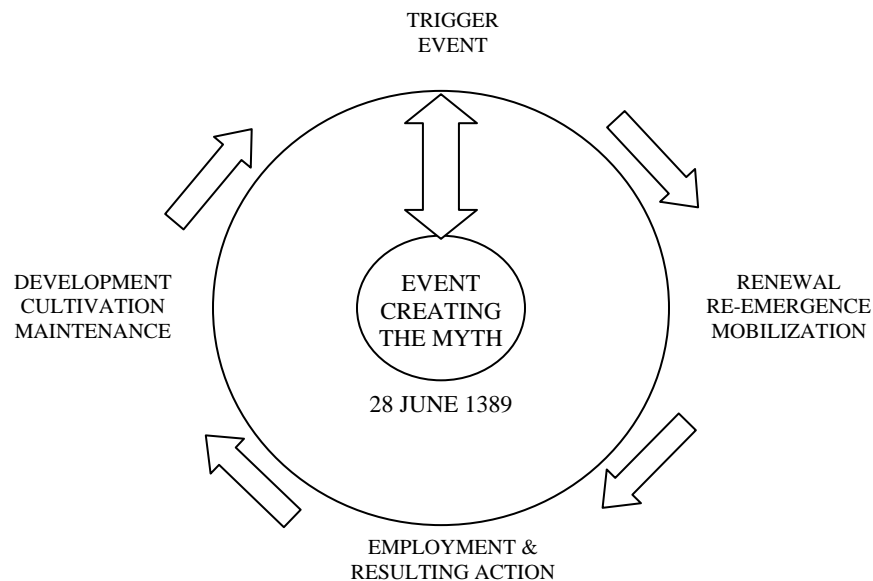


Figure 5. Lifecycle of the Kosovo Polje Mythology

At times, recent quotations about Kosovo appear that could be from the medieval era due to the emotional and consistent theme relating to Kosovo. Today’s Serbian

Orthodox Church continues to play a nationalist role through sermons, teachings, publications such as *Pravoslavlje*, and various religious websites. One *Pravoslavlje* press report in 1999 identified a continuing “Golgotha being endured by the Serbian people on Kosovo” referring to alleged abuses of Serbs by Kosovar Albanians.<sup>50</sup> Another website from the Metropolitinate of Montenegro and Littorra featured town hall speeches in Belgrade in September 1999 given by church leadership with the common theme of struggle in Kosovo. Referring to the latest violence in the region a metropolitan of the church claimed, “we are fighting . . . a new Kosovo battle but this time we have no venerable Knez and no Holy Cross . . . This year’s Vidovdan has undoubtedly been the most dreadful of all such holidays for [the] entire Serbian nation both in Kosovo and Metohija and outside of it.”<sup>51</sup> The speaker further comments about the goal for which the church is striving, “[to] restore our dignity and enable our come-back, with due respect of all human rights, to our ancient lands, our ancient hearths. May God grant and let it happen.”<sup>52</sup> A speech given by Serbian Bishop Artemy of Raska and Prizren at the same meeting was titled “Crucified Kosovo” featuring more suffrage, tragedy, and terror. It finished with a statement of action: “The crucified Kosovo can resurrect only in a resurrected, free, democratic, born again Serbia. Let us do our outmost [*sic*] to make this happen as soon as possible.”<sup>53</sup> In a radio interview from the popular Serbian radio station “B92” in February 2000, the same church metropolitan provided a timeless and rather confusing answer when asked about the future of Serbs in Kosovo:

There will be Serbs, there will be Serbs in Kosovo, if God grant, until the end of Kosovo. . . . And Kosovo cannot be taken from this nation in an eternal plan, not in the sense of private property but in the sense of the fact that this nation has become God’s nation, a mature nation precisely in the area of the Pec Patriarchy,

through the nation's martyrs, saints, temples, all the Jugovic mothers and the Kosovo oath.<sup>54</sup>

The references to God and epic poetry are evident and intertwined in Serbian religious nationalist rhetoric. Author Nicholas Pappas notes that the combination of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the epic culture is motivating for Serbs and has “helped to maintain the religious and historical identity of the Serbs in the era following Kosovo.” He adds that “both of these factors preserved the moral and ethical elements of the Serbian medieval legacy and Serbian Orthodox religious customs which were all-important in the formation of modern Serbian national identity.”<sup>55</sup>

The creation and development of the Kosovo Polje mythology and its subsequent preservation and cultivation provided the Serbian culture not only with an identity but a means to interpret people and events. The effects of that interpretation would influence not only Serbia, but the entire Balkan region, often with disastrous results.

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Thomas, *Serbia: Still Europe's Pariah?* (London: Alliance Publishers, 1996), 9.

<sup>2</sup>Florian Bieber, “Nationalist Mobilization and Stories of Serb Suffering,” *Rethinking History* 6, no. 1 (2002): 98.

<sup>3</sup>Nikola Tesla, “Zmai Iovan Iovanovich,” *The Century* 48, no. 1 (1894): 130-131.

<sup>4</sup>Julie A. Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>5</sup>Bogdan Denitch, *Ethnic Nationalism: The Tragic Death of Yugoslavia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 112.

<sup>6</sup>Bieber, 107.

<sup>7</sup>Robert Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 35.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Emmert, *The Battle of Kosovo: Early Reports of Victory and Defeat*, 28 February 2002, page 4 [The Society for Medieval Military History Home Page]; available from [//www.deremilitari.org/RESOURCES/ARTICLES/emmert.htm](http://www.deremilitari.org/RESOURCES/ARTICLES/emmert.htm); Internet; accessed 7 October 2004.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo, 1389* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 1.

<sup>11</sup>Dusan Batakovic, *The Kosovo Chronicles* (Belgrade: PLATO Press, 1992), 1; [Serbian National Defense Website] available from [www.snd-us.com/history/dusan/kc\\_part3.htm](http://www.snd-us.com/history/dusan/kc_part3.htm); Internet; accessed 26 December 2004.

<sup>12</sup>Mertus, 10.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>15</sup>Thomas Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo, 1389*, 5.

<sup>16</sup>Nada Milosevic-Djordjevic, *The History of Serbian Culture*, 2004, [http://www.suc.org/culture/history/Hist\\_Serb\\_Culture/chi/Oral\\_Tradition.htm](http://www.suc.org/culture/history/Hist_Serb_Culture/chi/Oral_Tradition.htm). (8 October 2004), 1.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>Louis Sell, *Slobodan Milosevic and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 71.

<sup>19</sup>Milosevic-Djordjevic, 3-4.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>21</sup>Alex Dragnich, *Serbia's Historical Heritage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 29.

<sup>22</sup>Alexander Greenawalt, "Kosovo Myths; Karazdic, Njegos, and the Transformation of Serb Memory" *Spaces of Identity* 3 (2001): 53; [article on-line] available from [http://www.univie.ac.at/spaces ofidentity/vol\\_3/\\_pdf/Greenawalt.pdf](http://www.univie.ac.at/spaces ofidentity/vol_3/_pdf/Greenawalt.pdf); Internet.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>*The Death of the Jugovics' Mother*, Mark D. Lew Serbian Epic Poetry Homepage, 4 May 1999; available from <http://home.earthlink.net/~markdlew/SerbEpic/index.htm>; Internet; accessed on 22 December 2004.

- <sup>25</sup>Milosevic-Djordjevic, 5.
- <sup>26</sup>*Serbian Epic Poetry* [Website] available from [http://www.fastload.org/se/Serbian\\_epic\\_poetry.html](http://www.fastload.org/se/Serbian_epic_poetry.html); Internet; accessed on 24 September 2004, page 1.
- <sup>27</sup>Vasa D. Mihailovic, Introduction for *The Mountain Wreath* by Petar Njegos II, February 2000, Project Rastko Website, Internet Library of Serbian culture. [www.rastko.org.yu/knjizevnost.umetnicka.njegos.mountain\\_wreath.html#introduction](http://www.rastko.org.yu/knjizevnost.umetnicka.njegos.mountain_wreath.html#introduction), (22 December 2004), Introduction.
- <sup>28</sup>Thomas Emmert, "Milos Obilic and the Hero Myth." *Journal of the North American Society for Serbian Studies* 10 (1996): 1.
- <sup>29</sup>Petar Petrovic Njegos II, *The Mountain Wreath*, trans. and ed. Vasa D. Mihailovich (Irvine: Charles Schlacks Jr, 1986), 40.
- <sup>30</sup>Milosevic-Djordjevic, 5.
- <sup>31</sup>Alex Dragnich, 20.
- <sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 28-29. A synaxary is an account of the life and events of saints and holy men while feastdays are celebrations of saints.
- <sup>33</sup>Christopher Bennett, *Yugoslavia's Bloody Collapse: Causes, Course and Consequences* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 20.
- <sup>34</sup>Thomas Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo 1389*, 81.
- <sup>35</sup>Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 79-80.
- <sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 80.
- <sup>37</sup>Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo 1389*, 234-275.
- <sup>38</sup>Michael Sells, "Crosses of Blood: Sacred Space, Religion, and Violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina-The 2002 Paul Hanly Furfey Lecture," *Sociology of Religion*, (Fall 2003): 2.
- <sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>40</sup>Bogdan Denitch, *Ethnic Nationalism: The Tragic Death of Yugoslavia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 114-115.
- <sup>41</sup>Stevan Pavlowitch, *Serbia: The History of an Idea* (New York: New York City University Press, 2002), 236.
- <sup>42</sup>Sells, 2.



- <sup>43</sup>Thomas Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo, 1389*, 129.
- <sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 95.
- <sup>45</sup>Laura Silber, Allan Little, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (United States: Penguin Books, 1996), 72.
- <sup>46</sup>Bieber, 104.
- <sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 99-100.
- <sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.
- <sup>49</sup>Sells, 4.
- <sup>50</sup>Pravoslavlje Press Report, 27 June 1999, Metropolitinate of Montenegro and Littora web site, <http://www.mitropolija.cg.yu/aktuelno/saopstenja/e990627.html>, (20 November 2004), 1.
- <sup>51</sup>Metropolitinate of Montenegro and Littora website, Speeches on the Presentation of the Book *Crucified Kosovo*: "Shame and Blame in the Face of Christian Europe," translated by Vesna Novakovic, 13 September 1999, <http://www.mitropolija.cg.yu/aktuelno/saopstenja/e990816.html> (20 November 2004), 1.
- <sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.
- <sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.
- <sup>54</sup>Metropolitinate of Montenegro and Littora website, B92 Interview of the Day, 26 February 2000, [http://www.mitropolija.cg.yu/aktuelno/saopstenja/e\\_int\\_b92\\_000226.html](http://www.mitropolija.cg.yu/aktuelno/saopstenja/e_int_b92_000226.html) (20 November 2004), 9.
- <sup>55</sup>Alex Dragnich, *Serbia's Historical Heritage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 31.

## CHAPTER 4

### EFFECTS OF THE KOSOVO POLJE MYTHOLOGY

Serbia's tragic flaw is an obsession with its own history. Serbian hearts are in their past, not in the future.<sup>1</sup>

Warren Zimmerman, U.S. Ambassador to Yugoslavia, 1989-1992

The multiple effects created by the Kosovo Polje mythology range from the first order effect of influencing individual Serbian awareness and beliefs to second and third order effects such as cultural and political mobilization and nationalist action. Those effects, combined with additional facets of ethnic division and memory in an environment that allows them to flourish, can produce change with dramatic and often disastrous results. This chapter addresses how the first order effects are created through the interpretive lens of the "Kosovo Prism" and illustrates, through historical examples, the progression to the second and third order effects of Serbian popular political mobilization and nationalist action.<sup>2</sup>

Defining events in terms of the past using the Kosovo mythology places those events neatly into the context of a known set of Serbian definitions, characters, and themes. Through the Kosovo Prism, as historian Florian Bieber labels it, people are cast in terms of a protagonist such as the martyred religious leader Prince Lazar, the patriot warrior hero Milos Obilic, or a supporting mother and suffering Serbian maiden; or they can be portrayed as an antagonist figure defined by the traitorous Vuk Brankovic, the oppressive intruder and occupying Turk, or the ungrateful non-Serb outsider such as Western Europe. Surrounding these characters are themes of Serb victimization, sacrifice, struggle, oppression, vengeance, and nationalist religion that complete the viewpoint

through the Kosovo Prism. Explaining the world in the well-defined and established mold of the Kosovo mythology simplifies the interpretation of people and events and often justifies and legitimizes a simplified reaction. The figure below shows a graphic interpretation of the Kosovo Prism that illustrates the interpretation of events, people, and history using the known set of characters and themes from the Kosovo mythology.

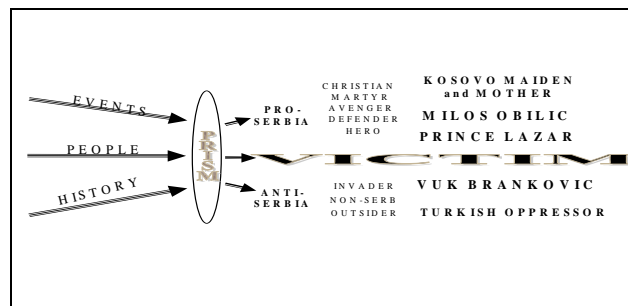


Figure 6. The Kosovo Prism

Since the battle of Kosovo Polje, the use of the Kosovo Prism as a means of interpretation became an effective tool for Serbs to define events in the emotive terms of their interpreted history. That tool provides four primary functions: a self-imager, an imager of others, an explainer of history, and a justifier of action. This first section explains the use of the Kosovo Polje mythology as the lens through which Serbs interpret themselves and their history and provides historical examples of that use.

Florian Bieber notes that the Kosovo Polje mythology serves the purpose to “explain, contextualize, and justify a multitude of developments since the emergence of Serbian nationalism in the early nineteenth century.”<sup>3</sup> He adds that it eliminates the time gap between past events and present ones by “contemporizing the past and historicizing

the present.”<sup>4</sup> It provides a rather limited interpretation of history that eliminates unbiased analysis of events and perpetuates pre-judgement. It limits the user of the Kosovo Prism to a recurring contextual model of people and events without the application of unbiased critical thought.

Author and former United States Ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmerman, spent years observing and interacting with Serbs and their culture. He provides insight into the Serbian self-image and their view of the world and its events. He feels that “Serbia’s tragic flaw is its obsession with its own history” and suggests that the victimization theme is the most common aspect of the packaged version of history that the Serbs utilize.<sup>5</sup> He adds that, “this potted history--it never varies in its content--is a ritual that Serbs must go through in justifying the current actions of Serbian politicians or soldiers.”<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the ever-present victimization theme, common Serbian self-image interpretations include the protector or savior role, religious patriot, and sacrificial martyr. Zimmerman tells of countless conversations with Serbs that touted how they saved Europe in 1389 at Kosovo Polje from Turkish barbarism, defended Christianity for the continent, and were betrayed by an ungrateful outside world--despite the fact that actual history shows numerous differences with many of these claims. He summarizes this point by stating that the “evidence of history has not shaken the general Serbian conviction, derived from Kosovo, that Europe owes the Serbs something for defending it and that its valiant Serbian warriors are always betrayed, either by treason in war or by an unjust peace. Thus, the argument goes, Serbs deserve special treatment.”<sup>7</sup> The actual history that defies the Serb interpretation shows that the “defense” of Europe at Kosovo

Polje was actually a Serbian defeat far from immediately threatening the capital cities of Europe, that it was more of a territorial versus a religious-based engagement, and that the Turks actually completed the takeover of the region some seventy years after the battle of Kosovo Polje. There is also no actual evidence of a betrayal during the battle. Epic folklore has placed blame on the shoulders of Vuk Brankovic for treason and betrayal rather than any first-hand account.

The Serbian convictions derived from the battle of Kosovo Polje produced what many scholars call a “framework to understand past, present, and future.”<sup>8</sup> This “referential framework” as author Ivan Colovic labels it, results in the “folklorization” of current history that transforms “national history into popular literature and mythology.”<sup>9</sup> Noel Malcolm describes the epic surrounding the battle as a “totem or talisman of Serbian identity” that represents the “permanent connective tissue that imbues Serbs with the feeling of national identity.”<sup>10</sup> That self-image, as defined by Kosovo, is a convenient, understandable, and favorable option for Serbs to adopt that has a ready-made special status, already accepted by society. Why would one choose otherwise and breach the national and cultural comfort zone? Why venture beyond the established boundaries of this Serbian set of “colors” produced by the Kosovo Prism to risk the unpopular brand of a traitorous Vuk Brankovic or ungrateful outsider? Politicians, media, intellectuals, and anyone else with an opinion perceived as contrary to the themes of the Kosovo mythology were branded a traitor, outsider, or not a “true Serb.” Ironically, Slobodan Milosevic himself provides the best example of that process in action as illustrated later in this chapter.

Balkans historian Robert Thomas offers an authoritative look at the main characters that are used to define people through the Kosovo Prism resulting in “mythic archetypes of virtue and villainy.”<sup>11</sup> About the virtuous figures, he notes that Prince Lazar “became the embodiment of saintly sacrifice” and Milos Obilic became the heroic yardstick and “the epitome of warlike valour [*sic*] and a ‘ruler over the shadows of heroes in the abode of dead heroes’.”<sup>12</sup> Serbian Scholar Stevan Pavlowitch adds that Lazar’s role is definitive and he is “the bearer of their [the Serbs] heritage.”<sup>13</sup> Concerning the villainous characters, Thomas adds that the measure of villainy in the form of Vuk Brankovic “would remain an enduring symbol of the dangers posed to the Serbian people by internal strife and disunity.”<sup>14</sup> Louis Sell notes the lasting effect of Vuk’s character on the Serb national psyche cautioning against disunity and treason from within: “the tradition of Brankovic’s treason, which endowed the Serbs with a longing for unity, forms the national slogan ‘Only Harmony Can Save Serbia’.”<sup>15</sup> Serbian author Sima Cirkovic suggests the utility of the traitor theme and character represented in the Kosovo epic, citing that it was widely used in “condemning and stigmatizing treason.”<sup>16</sup> In a more general observation, Ivan Colovic notes the usefulness of the Serbian national identity based on the Kosovo epic for use as a “reliable yardstick . . . when faced with some moral or political choice.”<sup>17</sup> Colovic offers additional insight into the Kosovo Polje mythical cast by describing a “pantheon of Serbian national heroes . . . whose brave, self-sacrificing exploits founded the nation and represent the object of a state cult.”<sup>18</sup> Pantheon figures Prince Lazar, Milos Obilic, and the suffering Mother of the Jugovics, originating in medieval history, folklore poetry, and mythology, were embellished and “nationalized” into the Serbian popular imagination.<sup>19</sup>

Colovic refers to the Serbian author Bojana Vukotic's interpretations of the hero figures. Vukotic suggests that Prince Lazar is the "personification" of Serbian idealism and that "Milos Obilic represents the embodiment of a synthesis of popular militant decisiveness and purebred courage [and] the Mother of the Jugovici and the Maid of Kosovo are the best synthesis of the qualities of the purebred Serbian woman."<sup>20</sup> Serbs were portrayed as a superior warrior culture of heroes, chosen by God as the preferred Southern Slav people to reign in the region. All others were Slavs at heart that had been unknowingly or unjustly converted from their true Serbian heritage. Nineteenth century poet Peter Njegos termed Slavic Muslims as "turkified" who required either conversion or extermination. In his poetry, he proclaimed that Serbia "will never be pure and whole until cleansed of the traitors (converts to Islam) in their midst."<sup>21</sup> Ivan Colovic adds that the Serbian nationalists of the 1990s claimed that the Croats were "Catholicised Serbs" and the Muslims were "Islamicised Serbs" who "abandoned their Serbianness [and] became their own greatest enemy and oppressors of their being."<sup>22</sup> These purely Serbian heroes and the absolute anti-Serbian villains are projected via the Kosovo Prism and act as the standard of measure by which people and events are judged.

What are the effects of that judgment using the Kosovo Prism? Does it maintain and support a proud heritage or cultivate rigid pre-judgment? Most scholars of Balkans culture and politics view the Kosovo Prism as a negative interpretive tool. Author Maja Mikula labels this type of mono-cultural interpretation as "the rhetoric of othering" and notes the dangers of "invoking mythical narratives from a pool of popular culture to construct a collective identity [that] functions to mobilize dangerous passions in the service of a 'national cause' for present-day purposes."<sup>23</sup> Concerning the Serbian use of

past tragedies to define and justify events of the 1990s, Michael Sells uses the phrase “pornography of victimhood” that perpetuated “their [Serb] self-image as heroes rather than criminals.”<sup>24</sup> From personal experience, Warren Zimmerman noted the effects on the Serbian public of interpretation using Kosovo as the context. He assessed that the emotional use of the Kosovo framework was not limited to nationalist-minded intellectuals and politicians who recreated “their nations pasts in the distorted images of their current ambitions,” but that those ideas were “prevalent throughout Serbian society, from shopkeepers to peasant farmers to journalists.”<sup>25</sup> The dangerous results of such a “paranoid view of the past,” Zimmerman notes, is that it “excuses, or at least explains, any atrocity committed in the present.”<sup>26</sup>

Ivan Colovic adds to the list of consequences suggesting that creating “the historical present” with nationalist mythology yields “some of the most significant obstacles in the path of democratisation [*sic*].” Those nationalist myths, such as the Kosovo epic, tend to be long lasting and run unopposed in the Serbian political thoughtscape without effective counter-argument that could promote a more democratic approach.<sup>27</sup> Colovic suggests the solution to counter the effects of the Kosovo Prism is to eliminate “political rhetoric based on images and characters” and that truly democratic politicians “must refuse to allow their ideas, their thoughts, [and] their words to move into the vampires’ house of so-called Heavenly Serbia.”<sup>28</sup> The “Heavenly Serbia” to which Colovic refers is a misguided and faultless Serbia based on a perceived history of racial greatness, ordained and chosen by God, and based on a fabricated mythology instead of factual history.



The progression from those first order ideas, thoughts, and words interpreted through the Kosovo Prism to subsequent order effects of cultural, local, and national action, must take place in an environment that fosters that evolution. Serbian history illustrates the Kosovo Prism and other effects of the Kosovo Polje mythology are evident since the first embellished mythical accounts after the battle. Effects on Balkan society since that time can be measured at the cultural and local level through folklore, epic literature, and the Serbian Orthodox Church. The common sense of Serbian community, motivation, and explanation based on the Kosovo Polje mythology amidst the Turkish occupation set the conditions for the development of nationalism based on a Serbian state and not just on cultural linkage. Depending on the definition of nationalism, the start date for the Serbian nation can vary. Some definitions are based on the creation or existence of a nation-state while others define the term *nation* along unifying cultural linkages where an existing state is not required. History shows that the Serbian cultural nation has existed since the medieval era and the development of nationalism based on a Serbian nation-state began in the late nineteenth century.

Historian Julie Mertus defines the term *nation* in the cultural and ethnic context, which is more applicable to the Balkan region due to the lack of separate nation-states under Ottoman rule. She writes, “nation does not refer to a state. Rather, nations are groups united by real and imagined markers such as history, language, and traditions. Shared myths and memories hold key importance in the definition of nations.”<sup>29</sup>

Author Christos Pavloudis identifies the term *nation* as “a large social group, which usually has all or most of the following components: language, religion, myths and historical memories, origin with a substantial distinctiveness and exclusivity, a mass

public character and culture, solidarity, national consciousness, political unity, and particular interests in economy and legal rights.”<sup>30</sup> Pavloudis’ research identifies nationalism as “a system of ideas, values and norms, an image of the world and society, which makes a large social group aware of where it belongs and invests this sense of belonging with a particular value.”<sup>31</sup> The Kosovo Polje mythology contains many of the components that comprise Pavloudis’s definition of *nation* such as religion, mythology, and historical memory creating a common culture and solidarity among Serbs. It serves as the basis for the “system of ideas, values, and norms” that are the foundation for his interpretation of nationalism. He further divides nationalism into two types: Risorgimento Nationalism and Integral Nationalism. The former is a political movement holding to the principle of solidarity of the oppressed against the oppressors, of good versus evil.<sup>32</sup> Integral Nationalism, opposite of Risorgimento Nationalism, defines one’s nation as the absolute and asserts the interests of the nation at the expense of any others in a Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest fashion, and thus everything can be justified as ethical and moral if it serves the nation and its power.<sup>33</sup>

Pavloudis goes on to identify a particular brand of Integral Nationalism common to the Balkans. Instead of nationalism based on industry and socioeconomic development in Western Europe, “nationalism came to the Balkans under conditions of uneven development and modernization, which was the result of the socioeconomic backwardness of the Ottoman Empire.”<sup>34</sup> His theory suggests that nationalism was “awakened” in the nineteenth century by a combination of a common national language and religious and ethnic identity that “was stronger whenever ecclesiastical institutions supported it.”<sup>35</sup>

The mythology surrounding the Battle of Kosovo Polje was a major influence on the religious and ethnic “awakeners” that Pavloudis addresses. The collective memory of the event was the foundation for the development of the Serbian national consciousness. It was during that development when, “the boundary between scholarship and national mythology became fluid.”<sup>36</sup> The blurred line between truth and mythology, and even the replacement of historical truth with mythology perceived as truth, is not an uncommon progression in the Balkan region. Pavloudis provides further detail of national mythology and its relationship to the specific brand of nationalism in the Balkans that began in the nineteenth century and continued through the twentieth:

The appearance of heroes and reincarnation of forefathers and a type of mythological stories created mythical places, figures, and characters that became conspicuous, even dominant features of public discourse in the Balkans. They became the largest and most important components of the thematic of the language of ethnic nationalism. Balkan nationalists tried to endow their states with a long pre-statehood history of nationality and national assertion and sought to establish uninterrupted continuities of national existence since the remotest antiquity.<sup>37</sup>

Pavloudis describes a common story shared in the Balkans by almost every ethnic group. It is one of great medieval national history cut short by Ottoman conquest and oppression that gave rise to heroic rebellion with a direct ethnic link from that great age to the present.<sup>38</sup> The story, like the Kosovo mythology, provides an enemy, a longing for a golden age, and a motivation to fight tyranny and oppression--all of the key ingredients for a nationalist rally cry. Whether nationalism is defined only in cultural and ethnic terms or in the context of a nation-state, Serbian history illustrates both versions. The Integral Nationalism that Pavloudis identifies applies to Serbian history since the nineteenth century with the Kosovo Polje mythology serving as the interpretive lens and national compass fueling that nationalism.

Concerning the important role of religion as a catalyst that helped to maintain that epic national story and the perception of uninterrupted continuity of national existence, Michael Sells suggests that “religion identity,” through the Serbian Orthodox Church, was a key component of Serbian nationalism. He notes that religious mythology and nationalism have combined to play a role in perpetuating and justifying nationalist action with claims of Islamic treachery. Sells writes that “religious nationalism emerged in Serbia around the issue of Kosovo. Serb bishops chimed that Kosovar Albanians were plotting to ‘ethnically cleanse’ Serbs from Kosovo and--despite the radically secular basis of the Albanian autonomy movement--plotting an Islamic state in Kosovo as well.”<sup>39</sup> Sells notes the dangerous effects of the combination of the national Kosovo mythology and religion in the hands of militant Serb nationalists stating that “once militants had spilled blood in the name of that mythology they became dependent upon it. Serb nationalist leaders--clerical, intellectual, political, ‘entrepreneurial,’ and military--began by manipulating the power of the Kosovo myth and the Vidovdan [28 June Kosovo Polje battle anniversary] ritual for their own ends. Once the power of the symbols, ritual, and myths was instrumentalized, that power took on a life of its own.”<sup>40</sup> Sells assessment of the effects of the Kosovo Polje mythology illustrate the potential second and third order effects given the right conditions, environment, and a region with an accessible and full ethnic memory card.

With the religious cultivation of the Kosovo legend and eventual active role of the church in Serbian nationalism, the combination of politics and religion in Serbia became a formidable influence. From battle cries to political rallies, the Kosovo mythology was further cultivated through political rhetoric and action. Triggered and revived in times of

crisis and change, Serbs employed the epic story to rally support, justify action, and portray credibility. Beginning in the nineteenth century with the first organized nationalist uprisings against the Ottomans and culminating at the end of the 1980s with sweeping nationalist changes to the political landscape, the influence of the Kosovo legend has been common throughout Serbian politics. Balkan scholar Gale Stokes stresses the effect of the Kosovo mythology on politics. She writes that “the importance of the Kosovo myth to Serbian politics lies not in these actual histories but in its selection by the nationalists as the appropriate symbolic universe for Serbianness. It provided a vocabulary of experiences outside of time.”<sup>41</sup>

Historian Dusan T. Batakovic notes that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the influence of what he terms The Kosovo Covenant was the only Serbian “political tradition” and, even before modern European nation states, provided a “basis for a future national integration.” Batakovic describes the Kosovo Covenant as the promise that Lazar made, and therefore to which all Serbs are bound, to resist oppression and not accept injustice.<sup>42</sup>

To fuel the nationalist fervor, epic poetry and popular culture of the nineteenth century continued to cultivate the Kosovo Polje mythology. Petar Petrovic Njegos and Vuk Karazdic produced and compiled volumes of nationalist literature with the common Kosovo themes that spurred the desire for rebellion against the Ottoman Turks. The leader of what is known as the First Serbian Uprising from 1804-1815, Karageorge Petrovic, “referred to the need to remove the yoke that Serbia had borne since the battle of Kosovo, and for freedom to extend to Kosovo.”<sup>43</sup> Historian Traian Stoianovich adds that outbreaks of the rebellion across Serbia were influenced by “beliefs in the coming of

a liberating savior from the epic folk tales and expectations of a return to a golden age.”<sup>44</sup> With initial promises of support by Russia and additional overtures to France and Austria, Karageorge’s attempts to garner support failed as Europe focused on the exploits of Napoleon. With forces from Albania and Bosnia, the Ottomans ruthlessly defeated the uprising in 1815. Thomas Emmert notes that the uprising “was a partial fulfillment of that age long dream of avenging Kosovo and liberating Serbia” and that Serbs were aspiring to fill the shoes of the heroic Milos Obilic remembering “the personal sacrifice of the Kosovo assassin in the experiences of their own revolutionary environment.”<sup>45</sup> Although it was the first organized resistance against the Turkish, Serbia was once again a vassal without economic independence and isolated from the rest of Europe. The failed uprising added another defeat to the Serbian cultural memory.

With the growing nationalist spirit in the nineteenth century, Emmert adds that a flood of Kosovo-inspired artistic expression spread across the region using the context of Kosovo to portray the events and actions of the day. Lazar and Milos were the popular subjects of artists from theater to canvas. Education late in the century also featured the characters of the Serbian past. Michigan State Professor Steven W. Sowards notes that the education of Serbian males in the 1880s was “filled with tales of heroic martyrs who killed or were killed for their country [and] from folk-poetry about Kosovo . . . Thanks to patriotic books and teachers, such accounts influenced a generation of Serbian students.”<sup>46</sup> Devoted Serb students studied and recited texts of Kosovo songs and poetry from countless known and unknown authors such as the manuscript collections of Serb historian Baltazar Bogisic, Vuk Karazdic, and Peter Njegos II. The epic folklore and poetry thrived outside Serbia as well. In 1825, another collection of over 250 folk songs

about Kosovo was published by the German author Therese Albertine Luise von Jacobi-Talvi and distributed throughout Europe and America.<sup>47</sup>

In 1889, the Serbs attempted to celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of the battle of Kosovo Polje. Under the control of Austria-Hungary in the north and the Ottomans in the south, the Serbs held celebrations in multiple cities. Although officially prohibited in many areas, emotional speeches, dedications, journal articles, monuments, and church services re-visited the Kosovo battle and characters. In June 1889, the Serbian minister of foreign affairs, Cedomil Mijatovic, addressed the anniversary Vidovdan festivities on the meaning of Kosovo:

An inexhaustible source of national pride was discovered on Kosovo. More important than language and stronger than the Church, this pride unites all Serbs in a single nation. . . . The glory of the Kosovo heroes shone like a radiant star in that dark night of almost five hundred years. . . . Our people continued the battle in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries when they tired [*sic*] to recover their freedom through countless uprisings.<sup>48</sup>

In addition, quotes from newspapers of the day were full of references to past Kosovo glory and heroes. One example from the newspaper *Obzor* on 1 July 1889 touted the success of the anniversary celebration claiming that it “ignited the smoldering ambers on Lazar’s grave into full flames, which will not be easy to extinguish.”<sup>49</sup> Thomas Emmert summarized the effect of revisiting the Kosovo epic throughout the nineteenth century by stating, “the spirit of Kosovo was evoked on each anniversary of the battle, and priests and politicians alike reminded their people of the obligation to avenge Kosovo and unify Serbia.”<sup>50</sup>

The opportunity for the Serbs to “avenge Kosovo” came in the twentieth century on more than one occasion. Serbian nationalism continued to grow and references to the Kosovo mythology and history served as a rallying call to re-claim Serbia’s ancestral soil

and “ethnic space” in light of a weakening Ottoman empire.<sup>51</sup> By the beginning of the century, Serbia had limited autonomy under Ottoman rule in the southern region and Austro-Hungarian rule in the north. Political chaos reigned as the rotated between two governing families, the Karageorges and Obrenovics, each surrounded by multiple nationalist camps of varying influence and motivation. Inspired by Bulgaria’s independence from the Turks in 1908, the Serbs united to join forces with Montenegro, Greece, and Bulgaria to rid the region of Ottoman rule. In 1912, the southern slav alliance successfully expelled the weakened Turkish forces. The Serbs finally realized their dream of avenging Kosovo and Serb nationalist emotions peaked. Perhaps the most expressive example of life through the Kosovo Prism in the early part of the twentieth century is a passage from a Serbian soldier describing his emotions when notified his unit would be marching to Kosovo in 1912:

That single sound of that word--Kosovo--caused an indescribable excitement. This one word pointed to the black past--five centuries. In it exists the whole of our sad past--the tragedy of Prince Lazar and the entire Serbian people. . . .

Each of us created for himself a picture of Kosovo while we were still in the cradle. Our mothers lulled us to sleep with the songs of Kosovo, and in our schools our teachers never ceased in their stories of Lazar and Milos. . . .

My God, what awaited us! To see a liberated Kosovo . . . This place on which we stand is the graveyard of our glory. We bow to the shadows of fallen ancestors and pray God for the salvation of their souls.

The spirits of Lazar, Milos, and all the Kosovo martyrs gaze on us. We feel strong and proud, for we are the generation which will realize the centuries-old dream of the whole nation: that we with the sword will regain the freedom that was lost with the sword.<sup>52</sup>

Historian Melissa Bokovoy relates another story from the First Balkan War in 1912 that illustrates the influence of Kosovo on Serbia’s head of state, King Peter Karadjordjevic, as he visited one of Serbia’s “sites of memory.”<sup>53</sup> She writes that “shortly after the Serbian victory over the Ottoman Turks and their Albanian allies in Kosovo and



Macedonia in late October 1912, the Serbian king, Peter Karadjordjevic, traveled to the fourteenth-century monastery at Decani, south of Pec in western Kosovo. Here he lit the gigantic candle that was to be set burning only when the Serbs avenged the Battle of Kosovo.”<sup>54</sup> Bokovoy notes the national inspiration of the Kosovo Polje epic and how it “resonates with many Serbs well into the twentieth century because individually and collectively the Serbian nation has had multiple opportunities to reenact, both physically and symbolically, the experiences of their ancestors through its wars for national unification beginning in the nineteenth century.”<sup>55</sup>

Michael Sells uses the term “instrumentalize” to describe the “reenactment” to which Bokovoy refers. He notes, “mythology cannot actualize itself. It needs to be instrumentalized.”<sup>56</sup> Sells suggests that politicians instrumentalized the Kosovo mythology through media, the arts, and influential institutions such as universities and the church in order to mobilize support and justify political nationalist action.<sup>57</sup> Florian Bieber adds that Serbian writers “incorporated elements of the Kosovo myth into their novels, further invigorating Serb nationalism” while historians and intellectuals “began to draw on historical myths to justify Serbian claims to Kosovo.”<sup>58</sup> In *Balkan Babel*, Sabrina Ramet writes of the effects of the “instrumentalization” and the marketability of the emotions surrounding Kosovo:

Throughout Serbia, Kosovo was in the air. Serbs gloated over their reconquest of the province. Serbian bookstores filled their shelves with books about Kosovo. Musical artists dedicated their works to Kosovo. There was even a new perfume called “Miss 1389.”<sup>59</sup>

Peace in the Balkan region was elusive after the First Balkan War in 1912. After the successful war against the Turks; Greece and Serbia, along with Romania, fought Bulgaria in 1913 over the spoils of Macedonian territory. Victorious again, Serbia

increased its territory by eighty-two percent.<sup>60</sup> That victory was overshadowed and eventually nullified due to the actions of a very nationalist and Kosovo-centric Bosnian Serb group known as the Young Bosnians on none other than Vidovdan in 1914. The group's influence on politics and eventually the entire world order was fueled by the Kosovo legend. Specifically, young Gavrilo Princip played the role of hero Milos Obilic and pulled the trigger in the name of the Serb people. Thomas Emmert's research into the influence of Kosovo on the Young Bosnians yields the following description by historian Vladimir Dedijer of the individual whose assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary essentially started the downfall towards the First World War:

A teenager who knew Njegos's "Mountain Wreath" by heart, Princip had certainly been inspired by Njegos's characterization of Milos Obilic as the ideal exemplar of the philosophy that the murder of a tyrant was no murder. Like other Young Bosnians who were reared in the patriarchal society of the South Slav peasantry, Princip honored the legend of Kosovo. He believed that political assassination could help to restore the liberty lost on that Serbian field five centuries earlier.<sup>61</sup>

Historian Louis Sell relates a similar story about western journalist John Reed's visit to Serbia during World War One who "found the Kosovo myth still a powerful psychological force in the Serbian mobilization for war. . . . every Serbian peasant soldier remembered that when he was a child, his mother had greeted him, 'Hail little avenger of Kosovo!' Reed also recounted hearing Serbian children in their geography lessons reciting the list of 'Serbian lands in the order of their [still to come] redemption'--Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Croatia--an agenda for national expansion strikingly similar to that pursued by Milosevic almost a century later."<sup>62</sup>

With a direct link to starting the downward spiral towards the First World War, Serbia would pay the price a year later as Austro-Hungarian forces routed the Serb army

and occupied Serbia causing a disastrous exodus of the government, military, and civilians through Albania to the Adriatic. The year 1915 serves as another “Golgotha” in Serb history when Serbia ceased to exist. Stevan Pavlowitch notes the parallels to the Kosovo legend suggesting “the retreat gave the [Kosovo] legend new strength, with the accent again on sacrifice in battle--‘better die as free men than live as slaves.’ More than 240,000 died or were captured on the way.”<sup>63</sup>

Further emphasizing the Serb trend to view history in the context of the past, Melissa Bokovoy notes that countless commemorations of the Balkan Wars and World War I were based on the myth of Kosovo Polje and “provided the victims, survivors, and mourners a sense of continuity, sympathy, and identity with a similar sacrifice and loss.”<sup>64</sup> Bokovoy relates the description by a Serb nurse of the celebration after Serb forces took the town of Pristina in Kosovo in October 1912:

The soldiers lay on the ground and kissed it . . . and talked about how they had waited for over five hundred years for this moment, how Kosovo had been avenged. . . . I understood from June 1389 to October 1912 generation to generation lived to realize this dream--during times of happiness and grief Kosovo was talked about, and, now, the soldiers had arrived at this hour to drive the Turks out and free Kosovo. . . . They had fulfilled the oath of many generations.<sup>65</sup>

Ten years later, a military journal article described a Vidovdan celebration at Kosovo Polje, on “the plateau in the shadow of Gazi Mestana, [a portion of the Kosovo Polje battlefield] where Jug Bogdan with his ten sons, the Jugovici, perished, there is a large white cross with a stone base and the inscription, ‘Honor to the ancestors who taught us how to create a great fatherland. We will guard it and agree that it is more difficult to guard than to acquire.’”<sup>66</sup> Monuments, church dedications, school and holiday trips, and memorials by then King Peter Karadjordjevic demonstrated how Serb memory

ritualistically returned to Kosovo Polje. It was that consistent Serbian remembrance and commemoration of events of Kosovo that led to the creation after World War I of the Serbian “memorial day” on none other than Vidovdan, 28 June, the anniversary date of the 1389 battle of Kosovo Polje.<sup>67</sup>

The emotions following the Balkan Wars and World War One illustrate two critical and long-lasting byproducts of memory using the Kosovo context of Serbian suffering and heroic victimhood. First, the belief in ethnic territory, or, as author Martha Lampland suggests, “the absolute inseparability of the possession of land [Kosovo] and national identity.”<sup>68</sup> That seemingly indivisible emotional relationship continued to dominate Serbian policy for the remainder of the century. Second, the self-appointed superior status given to Serbs by Serbs due to sacrifices and suffering that “elevated the Serbs to a position of first among equals, a position that they collectively remembered, commemorated, and believed to be rightfully theirs throughout the twentieth century.”<sup>69</sup> Ivan Colovic suggests the positive aspects and guiding principles of the Kosovo epic and notes that the “Kosovo Option’--the choice to use the Kosovo Polje mythology as a directional guidance and interpretive tool--has “fatefully determined the whole people’s behavior at key moments in Serbian history.”<sup>70</sup> Author Dragutin Ognjanovic adds that “the brightest examples of its witness are the First Uprising, the Balkan Wars, and the Serbian Golgotha of the First World War.”<sup>71</sup> The influence of the Kosovo Polje mythology through World War One on Serbian policy and individual motivation created both high and low points in Serb history. From the motivation to defeat an occupying power to the cause of a world war, the role of the Kosovo legend continued to evolve. The remainder of the twentieth century awaited its next employment.

Following World War One, borders in the Balkans were re-drawn and an attempt to create a multi-ethnic state began with the creation of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in 1919. The interwar period was a politically chaotic period of multiple parties following ethnic lines intermixed with a king, a regent, fascists, nationalists, communists, and the Serbian Orthodox Church. The kingdom was renamed Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929 under King Alexander and efforts to develop a constitution continued. Croatian Ustashe, or fascist, radicals assassinated King Alexander in 1934 while in Paris and eleven-year-old Peter II nominally took the throne.<sup>72</sup> With the bombing of Belgrade and invasion by the Axis powers in 1941, the Nazis quickly conquered the region and established a quisling government. The young king fled and Serbia was once again an occupied region. The Serbs found themselves oppressed and surrounded among the other Yugoslav ethnic groups. Unlike the pro-Axis Croats and Albanians, they chose to fight against the occupation. The period of World War Two loosely united Serbia against yet another occupying power and those who collaborated with it. From 1941 to 1944, the Axis powers occupied the region and Serbian hatred quickly developed for the occupiers and their Croatian allies. The Germans banned Serb culture, language, and traditions. A new armed struggle for the Serb people began and two main groups actively organized armed resistance. The Chetniks, a group of Yugoslav military officers led by Serbian Colonel Dragoljub Draza Mihajlovic, and the Partisans, a multi-ethnic communist-based organization led by Josip Broz Tito, fought the Axis forces, each other, and Axis collaborators throughout the war. Tito and his partisans gained strength with the support of the Allies during the war and he eventually became

the Yugoslavian leader declaring the establishment of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia on 29 November 1945.

Concerning the period of World War Two, the influence of the Kosovo mythology is unclear. Most sources addressing the period focus on the Partisans and Tito, the Chetniks, and Serbian hatred for the Croatian Ustache. The mythology did not appear to garner the same unifying Kosovo fervor as with previous events. Perhaps, the Serbs did not have an effective common motivation or unifying leadership due to the misery of oppression and murder at the hands of Axis forces and collaborators. Additionally, the Allies choice to support Josip Broz Tito and the Partisans--an organization fervently opposed to ethnic nationalism--prevented Serbian nationalists from establishing an effective power base. Despite those factors, the Kosovo mythology survived the era through the consistent preservatives of epic folklore, literature, and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Additionally, World War Two added to the already far-reaching Serbian ethnic memory, the hatred for anything German, Croatian, or Albanian due to the atrocities committed against the Serbian people during that time.

With the political shift to communism after World War Two, Marshall Tito suppressed ethnic nationalist viewpoints in an effort to create Yugoslavs and distance the region from ethnic separation and differences. Researcher Gerald Moller calls the effort, "Tito's clever arrangement, which froze the internal multiethnic, multireligious, and economic situation he inherited and partly created in Yugoslavia."<sup>73</sup> Despite the push to create a homogeneous Yugoslavia free of historical and ethnic memories and full of brotherhood and unity, the Kosovo Polje epic remained alive, but dormant. Author Robert Thomas notes that Tito was aware of the emotional strength of Kosovo and did

not attempt to eliminate it completely. He adds, “Communism had never sought to supplant ‘Kosovo’ in the public mind as the master-symbol of the Serbian myth.”<sup>74</sup> Tito did, however, create policies to contain and minimize Serb sentiment in order to diffuse any ethnic division. Gerald Moller adds, “Tito’s containment of the Serb majority within Yugoslavia was carefully designed to restrict a Serbian state and the Serb ethnic group within the ethnic spectrum of Yugoslavia.”<sup>75</sup> Nationalist Serbs quietly resented the federal policies placing them on equal footing with others in the federation until Tito’s death. Slobodan Milosevic’s biographer, Louis Sell, notes how the epic legend was easily revived after the death of Tito: “the Communists--who deliberately downplayed the national histories of all the Yugoslav peoples--did their best to suppress the Kosovo myth in Serbia. It was revived in the 1980s by [Serbian nationalist and novelist] Dobrica Cosic and other ideologues of the Serb nationalist revolt when they saw how effectively images of the beleaguered Serb population in Kosovo could be manipulated to mobilize popular support for their campaign to overturn Communism in Serbia.”<sup>76</sup>

Perhaps the most important conclusion about the Tito period of rule in Yugoslavia as it relates to the Kosovo mythology is that the epic was so easily revived after his death. This fact suggests that the mythology was present, but not triggered and utilized due to the non-permissive atmosphere of the communist state. In 1980, Tito died and the region entered a decade of nationalist progression that began gradually and culminated at the end of the decade with fervent nationalist hysteria. Serbia was at the center of that progression with Kosovo as its core issue.

Balkan historian Julie Mertus notes that after Tito’s death, nationalist-minded Serbs, sparked by increasing ethnic tension in Kosovo, began criticizing his regime and

“exploiting the Kosovo issue to their gain.” She adds that “sensing the popularity of the nationalist appeal, would-be nationalists were encouraged to follow along. . . . blatantly nationalist articles began to appear in books and in less mainstream publications.”<sup>77</sup>

Mertus further illustrates the changes after Tito’s death with a series of interviews conducted in Kosovo. One interview quotes a Kosovo Albanian expressing the rising ethnic division when “after Tito’s death nobody felt secure anymore about living in ex-Yugoslavia, and people went back to their ethnic roots.”<sup>78</sup> Mertus summarizes the decade of the 1980s, noting how the Kosovo mythology was triggered to fulfill the needs of the Serbian nationalist movement with “the growth of dangerous, defensive, populist, and officially sanctioned nationalism.” She adds that this nationalism was perpetuated by a “coalition within Serbia of nationalists and communists [who] manipulated the myth of Kosovo to formulate nationalist ideology and produce propaganda. Serbs were said to be the victims of Albanians in Kosovo; they needed the protection of a strong leader like Slobodan Milosevic.”<sup>79</sup> In his book *Serbia: The History of an Idea*, Slavic historian Stevan Pavlowitch provides his description of the political vacuum left in the wake of Tito’s departure and the dismantling of Kosovo’s autonomy as a province by Serb nationalists:

As public opinion throughout Yugoslavia emerged from forty years of brainwashing, it was pounced upon by the worst remnants of Tito’s power structure. This time they brainwashed their respective communities into believing that they had to get rid of others in order to survive. . . . [they] adopted once again the language of romantic nineteenth-century nationalism.

When all else collapses, people turn to whatever gives them a collective identity. . . . the battle *for* Kosovo had been won . . . the way was open for all Serbs to be unified, as they had been in a distant golden age before the battle *of* Kosovo.<sup>80</sup>



As the communist political structure continued to deteriorate in the 1980s, nationalist politics grew more attractive to the Serb media, intelligentsia, and eventually all facets of Serbian society from the arts to industry. Connecting medieval history to the late twentieth century, Serb nationalists revived the victimhood theme common throughout their history and proclaimed the need to save Kosovo once again after years of alleged anti-Serbian Titoist policies and Kosovo Albanian repression. Pavlowitch identifies the revival of previous nationalist history where “Kosovo was again turned into a national symbol, as it had been at the time of the Balkan wars some three-quarters of a century earlier.”<sup>81</sup> He adds that the Kosovo history and sense of duty were revived and that “the territory now had to be ‘saved’, as the battle once again had to be ‘avenged’. The name became an incantation that linked the present crisis to memories of past injustices, and to nostalgia for ancient glories.”<sup>82</sup>

Three major political events of the 1980s linked to Kosovo were critical in solidifying the downward political spiral towards the destruction of Yugoslavia and the civil war that followed. The first, a document produced by Serbian intellectuals from the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (SANU) in 1986, set the stage for renewed Serbian nationalist action. The second event was Slobodan Milosevic’s trip to Kosovo in 1987 to ease ethnic and political tensions. The visit turned into a revelation for Milosevic where he had his first taste of Serbian nationalism. The third event is the culmination of the revived Serbian national consciousness at the six hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo Polje on 28 June 1989 at the battlefield site. Again, the core issue fueling the nationalist cause and motivating the Serbian masses for each of these key events was the Kosovo Polje epic mythology.

The first event in 1986 exemplified the upsurge of nationalist support by Serbian intelligentsia, specifically from a group of scholars from the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (SANU) led by Dobrica Cosic. Known as the “Memorandum of 1986,” the document was a lengthy proclamation of political and physical Serb victimhood criticizing the Yugoslav regime, the 1974 Pro-Kosovo Albanian Constitution, and basically all non-Serbs. Claiming that Kosovo was taken from Serbia by previous government policies that afforded autonomy to the province, the memorandum called for a new constitution placing Serbia in control of Kosovo and an end to what the document termed as the “physical, political, legal, and cultural genocide perpetrated against the Serbian population of Kosovo and Metohija.”<sup>83</sup> Building to a call for action, the scholars’ claims of persecution are emotionally descriptive claiming that the “cultural integrity of the Serbian people is their historic and democratic right” and that Serbs were the victims of the “deep spiritual wounds” of “physical extermination, to forced assimilation, to religious conversion, to cultural genocide, to ideological indoctrination, and to the denigration thereby disarmed intellectually and politically.”<sup>84</sup> The document finishes with the conclusion that the Serbs were forced into a revival of nationalism and collective remembrance of their past:

The Serbian nation must have an opportunity to find itself again and become a historical agent, must re-acquire an awareness of its historical and spiritual being . . . The Serbian nation cannot meekly await the future in such a state of uncertainty. . . . Serbia must not take a passive stand in all this, waiting to hear what others will say as she has done so often in the past.<sup>85</sup>

Historian Noel Malcolm described the lasting influence of the document as a “virtual manifesto for the ‘Greater Serbian’ policies pursued by Belgrade in the 1990s.”<sup>86</sup> Julie Mertus adds, “In three years, the document would be called a ‘platform or pamphlet for

political action' for Slobodan Milosevic and even a 'blueprint for war.'"<sup>87</sup> In reference to Kosovo and a call for action, Mertus continues:

The destiny of Kosovo, the Memorandum cautioned, "can no longer be fobbed off with empty words, convoluted resolutions, vague political platforms. . . it was the text on Kosovo that had particular resonance among the growing Serbian populist movements, in Kosovo and elsewhere. The message here was simple: Albanians (or someone else) have always been the evil Other; Serbs have always been the victims. Even for those who did not believe in the ideology of nationalism, the rhetoric served as a means to other ends."<sup>88</sup>

Balkan historian Laura Silber proposes that the memorandum did not create anything new, but brought to the surface existing political energy suggesting that "the draft Memorandum did not create nationalism, it simply tapped sentiments that ran deep among the Serbs, but which were suppressed and, as a result, exacerbated by Communism. The Academy's tract echoed opinions whispered throughout Serbia."<sup>89</sup>

The second influential political event of the 1980s occurred in April 1987 when Slobodan Milosevic, then the Deputy to the Serbian Communist Party President, traveled to Kosovo Polje to address the developing issues of ethnic tension in the province. Prior to the visit, Milosevic, a relatively obscure party official, displayed no strong feelings of Serbian nationalism, but while at Kosovo Polje he had a revelation that directed him to the heart of the Serbian nationalist cause and eventually to the highest political office in Serbia. During his visit, Serb protesters demonstrated against the government and expressed their claims of persecution by the Kosovar Albanian majority. When the crowd outside the meeting location, known as the "Ministry of Culture," became unruly with the police, others convinced Milosevic to address the protesters in order to diffuse the situation. Noel Malcolm describes the event as Milosevic responded to the incident with an impromptu speech sympathetic to the Serb demonstrators:

Milosevic broke off the meeting and came out to speak to the crowd, where he uttered--luckily for him, on camera--the words on which his entire political future would be built: "No one should dare beat you!" The crowd, enraptured by these words, began chanting "Slobo, Slobo!" With a skill which he had never displayed before, Milosevic made an eloquent extempore speech in defence of the sacred rights of Serbs. From that day, his nature as a politician changed; it was as if a powerful new drug had entered his veins.<sup>90</sup>

Louis Sell adds that Milosevic continued his improvisation urging the Serbs "to stay in Kosovo because 'this is your country; your homes, fields, and memories are here.' As he warmed to his subject, Milosevic raised the stakes: 'Yugoslavia cannot exist without Kosovo. Yugoslavia and Serbia will not give up Kosovo.'"<sup>91</sup> Sell describes the situation as an "epiphany" for Milosevic and that he "was 'like a heated stove' when he returned from Kosovo Polje in 1987. . . . [He] had learned how to tap into the powerful passion that Kosovo aroused among Serbs."<sup>92</sup> Sell notes that the Kosovo Polje epic was perfect for Milosevic and that it "was made for a demagogue, and Serbia was about to get one."<sup>93</sup>

The political context leading up to and surrounding the third and culminating political event of the nineteen eighties--the six hundredth anniversary of the battle of Kosovo Polje--was all that Milosevic could ask for. As he climbed the political ladder, he replaced political leaders across Serbia, its provinces, and in Montenegro that did not follow his nationalist party line. He amended the Serbian Constitution to severely limit Kosovo autonomy. The press and many aspects of Serbian society feverishly adopted nationalism. Florian Bieber describes the period of the eighties as Milosevic ascended to power as "a new nationalist atmosphere in Serbia where the supposed and real persecution of Serbs in Kosovo was construed as part of a long history of national suffering beginning in 1389."<sup>94</sup> Support for Milosevic and the emotional issue of Kosovo added to that atmosphere through the literature of the day as writers and playwrights

cultivated the myth “promoting the syndrome of self-pity, national pride, and martyrdom.”<sup>95</sup> Serb historians and scholars glorified the 1389 battle of Kosovo Polje as “one of the greatest armed confrontations in Europe” and that the Kosovo mythology was “not some imaginary legend of the past, but a real historical destiny that continues today.”<sup>96</sup>

The majority of the Serbian press supported Milosevic implicitly and those journalists that did not were forced to find work elsewhere. Balkans researcher John Patten notes that Slobodan Milosevic manipulated the press and offers Slavicist Sabrina Ramet’s commentary concerning his tactics: “to establish power in Serbia, Milosevic thought he needed a pliant press. He therefore fired a number of editors and journalists at the prestigious Politika publishing house, and the daily papers *Politika* and *Politika ekspres* as well as the weekly magazines *Duga* and *NIN* became mere mouthpieces for Milosevic’s policies.”<sup>97</sup> On the six hundredth anniversary date of the Kosovo battle *Politika* ran a nationalist headline referring to the common theme of heroes and traitors: “the Serbian people has [sic] glorified and still glorifies its heroes and recognizes its traitors.”<sup>98</sup> In a speech addressing the anniversary, Serb writer M. Beckovic demonstrated the influence and emotion of Kosovo in the literary community. He stated that “on the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, we have to announce that Kosovo is Serbian and that this fact depends on neither Albanian natality nor Serbian mortality. There is so much Serbian blood and so many sacred relics in Kosovo that Kosovo will remain Serbian land, even if not a single Serb remains there.”<sup>99</sup>

The stage was set politically for Slobodan Milosevic to capitalize on the best opportunity of his career after a decade of maneuvering. Historian Christopher Bennett describes the summer of 1989 as the peak of the nationalist political and social situation:

Nationalist hysteria in Serbia was at its height during the summer of 1989 with an avalanche of books, films and plays commemorating the battle to mark the celebration. The bones of Prince Lazar, the Serb leader on that fateful day, were exhumed and paraded around the republic. Serbia was reborn and victory over Kosovo's Albanian majority had avenged the defeat on that day six centuries earlier!<sup>100</sup>

The six hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo Polje, Vidovdan, on 28 June 1989 at Kosovo Polje was the stage upon which Milosevic would play the role of savior of the Serb people. He tapped into the Serbian national consciousness dramatically returning to a Serb-controlled and avenged Kosovo and secured his position as the "New Knez Lazar."<sup>101</sup> Over one million Serbs arrived at Kosovo Polje to hear their avenger. Louis Sell describes the event and its allusions to future Serb aggression:

The mood of the crowd as it waited for hours under a warm sun to greet Milosevic was triumphant. Gaily colored banners and flags waved in the breeze beside the ubiquitous posters of Milosevic and Tsar Lazar. Chants of "We love Sloba" and "Europe, don't you remember that we defended you!" filled the air. JNA [Yugoslav National Army] units were deployed discretely around the perimeter of the site, but Albanians kept well away from the festivities.

Just when the crowd seemed to be getting impatient, Milosevic descended like an avenging angel by helicopter directly onto the site of the rally. An enthusiastic roar greeted him when he began his speech by welcoming the multitudes to what he described as "Kosovo--the heart of Serbia!" . . . Six centuries after the battle, he said, "we are again engaged in battles and are facing battles; they are not armed battles but such things cannot be excluded."<sup>102</sup>

Who were the crowd in the field that day and what was their motivation? Misha Glenny describes the masses that attended the event as a "viscous sea of Serb peasants who had come to pay homage to their dead of 600 years ago" and an "unlikely mixture of communists, Orthodox Christians and monarchists with one thing in common--they were

all Serbs.”<sup>103</sup> Serbs attended from outside the region as well arriving from other parts of Europe, North America, and as far away as Australia. Milosevic delivered the Kosovo message that he knew would find its mark. Although brief and sometimes contradictory, it contained references to struggle, medieval history, sacred land, and Serbian heroes combined with a proclamation of peace and brotherhood in Yugoslavia. Florian Bieber notes that Milosevic himself identified that the epic mythology was more important than the actual history:

The symbiosis of myth and politically mobilized nationalism thus actually rendered historical facts irrelevant, as Milosevic himself intimated during his speech at the commemoration: ‘it is difficult today to separate the legend from the history of this battle’, but he continued, ‘now this is no longer important’. . . The myth had transcended history because of its instrumentalization in a specific nationalist cause.<sup>104</sup>

The six hundredth anniversary celebration of the Serb defeat solidified popular support for Slobodan Milosevic and his nationalist policies setting the stage for the quest to unit all Serbs in a Greater Serbia. The Serbian people once again had a leader that represented and demonstrated their national identity. Noel Malcolm describes his popularity, “Thanks to the forces of Serbian nationalism which he had so carefully cultivated, Slobodan Milosevic now seemed an unstoppable force: the adulation he received at the massive Serbian celebration of the 600th anniversary of the battle of Kosovo on 28 June was comparable, in Yugoslav experience, only to the cult of Tito.”<sup>105</sup> Milosevic also provided a remedy to the years of perceived national tragedy at the hands of others--an enemy. Non-Serbs and specifically Slavic Muslims were officially put “on notice.” Julie Mertus summarizes the effect of Milosevic’s rhetoric, “by capitalizing on the greatest myth in Serbian folklore, Milosevic pitted Serbs not only against Albanians but also against the other enemy identified by the Kosovo myth: Slavic Muslims.”<sup>106</sup>

At the six hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo Polje, the confluence of all factors preserving and cultivating the Kosovo epic mythology created a “nationalist soup” that fed the Serbian masses and created the first, second, and third order effects that influenced history. Slobodan Milosevic triggered the mythology and set in motion the destruction of Yugoslavia and a decade of civil war. He marketed himself effectively and ascended to the top of the Serbian government with ruthless cunning. The fate of the vulnerable and formative region was in his hands.

Following the six hundredth anniversary of the battle of Kosovo Polje, Slobodan Milosevic continued to convert the communist-based political system to one based on Serbian nationalism. Skillfully eliminating his political enemies while re-writing the new Serbian constitution, Milosevic ensured that the Serb governing assembly enacted direct rule of Kosovo thereby reversing its previous autonomous status. An atmosphere of cultural nationalism was pervasive throughout the region. The rest of the Yugoslav federal republics--Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina--wanted no part of a Milosevic plan. Slovenia decided to break from the federation in 1991, ironically two days prior to Vidovdan, and the remaining republics followed suit over the next year except for Serbia’s little brother, Montenegro. Milosevic realized the opportunity at hand as a chance to solidify his power, Serbia’s dominant role in the region, and to unite all Serbs in a “Greater Serbia.” “All Serbs in one state” became the national slogan and was considered, as author Susan L. Woodward assesses, “an open threat to leaders in the neighboring republics.”<sup>107</sup>

Stemming from the paranoid diatribe of the nationalist-based Memorandum of 1986, a fervor of Serbian defense against genocide, rape, and oppression filled the



Serbian national psyche. Bogdan Denitch notes “the Serbian intransigence about Kosovo was easily extended to the defense of Serbs supposedly also threatened with ‘genocide’ in Croatia and Bosnia [creating] a frightening degree of national homogenization in Serbia.”<sup>108</sup> Julie Mertus adds that nationalists convinced the nation that the “Serbs’ very existence was in danger” and that it was a “question of survival of the entire Serb nation.”<sup>109</sup> In this context, the nation was not defined in terms of the nation-state of Serbia, but as ethnic territory wherever Serbs lived and died. Ivan Colovic adds that the “Serbian Political Ethno-Myth,” with the Kosovo epic mythology as its core, promotes the idea of “holy soil . . . where there are Serbian graves, there is Serbia.” This soil “soaked in the blood of its ancestors and marked by the graves of its forbears, but without the presence of living Serbs” is still considered Serb territory regardless of its actual location.<sup>110</sup> Armed with this mentality, the large Serb populations on the “frontier” in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina united and declared separate autonomous governance, looking towards Mother Serbia in the east for support as nationalism drove the region to war. Serbia responded with all of the vigor and vengeance of the Kosovo mythology in the form of military and paramilitary support and unquestioning media backing with full sanctioning from the Serbian Orthodox Church. Colovic suggests that in Serb history “when the drums of war begin to sound, dead heroes emerge from the graves of their canonical pictures to appear in the figures of living political and military leaders.”<sup>111</sup> Slobodan Milosevic’s portrait hung next to Prince Lazar’s deified image and a “call to glory” to avenge the past in the name of fallen Kosovo heroes spread throughout Serbia. As a justifier of action and a motivator, Colovic suggests, the Serbs used what he terms as the “Kosovo option” or the choice to believe in and apply the Kosovo mythology. He

adds that the Kosovo option served as the “symbolic legitimization [*sic*] of an ethnically centralized political order . . . to give an illusion of reality and continuity to its imaginary ethnic centre [*sic*].” He adds “the behaviour [*sic*] of Serbs at important historical moments becomes in a spontaneous way unique and predictable” using the Kosovo option.<sup>112</sup> That spontaneous behavior unfortunately produced the most extreme effect of the Kosovo Polje mythology--violence and death. By 1992, the violence began with war in Croatia and Bosnia. Michael Sells relates stories of Serb militia reciting Kosovo folklore prior to destroying entire Muslim populations in Bosnia-Herzegovina who were “blessed before and after their acts by Serb clergy amid references to Lazar.” Entire towns were destroyed and given Serbian names with the streets re-named after heroes from Serb national mythology.<sup>113</sup>

The leader of the Bosnian Serb forces, General Ratko Mladic, continued to refer to the Kosovo Polje mythology throughout his vengeful campaign in Bosnia-Herzegovina. At a celebration of the 1389 battle in 1995, Mladic proclaimed the parallels between his “personal mission” and the epic battle:

Prince Lazar took communion with his army and submitted himself to the heavenly kingdom, defending his fatherland, faith, freedom and the honour [*sic*] of the Serbian nation. We must understand the essence [*sic*] of that sacrifice so that we can draw from it a historical lesson. The fact that we have today created a victorious army has ensured that Lazar’s sacrifice has passed beyond the realms of simple myth.<sup>114</sup>

The Serb media, feeding the nationalist beast, used the Kosovo context to glorify Serb conquests and create new heroes. Similar to the early Serbian Orthodox eulogies to the fallen knights of Kosovo, the magazine *Duga* paid tribute to a Serb leader of the paramilitary “Serbian Guard” who was killed in the Lika region of Croatia. The tribute told of his “victorious smile” and how he “longed for someone to write that Lika was his

Kosovo and that . . . he had migrated into an epic and forever settled in the heavenly kingdom of Serb warriors.” At his funeral, additional Kosovo references added emphasis and meaning as a speaker touted the Serbian Guard as “an army with the soul of a maiden, the habits of a priest, and the heart of Obilic.”<sup>115</sup>

By the end of 1995, international pressure and limited direct military action forced Slobodan Milosevic to abandon support for his Serb “brothers” in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in order to legitimize himself on the international stage as a peace broker and the caretaker of Serbian best interests. Ever the opportunist, Milosevic marketed himself as “a man who had brought Serbia peace, relief from the sanctions regime, and acceptance back into the international community.”<sup>116</sup> Continuing the interpretation of events through the Kosovo Polje mythology, nationalist Serbs labeled Milosevic a traitor for abandoning the Serbs on the “frontier.” One denouncement claimed “after six centuries Vuk Brankovic, for the first time, can sleep peacefully in his grave. A bigger traitor has now appeared and his name is Slobodan Milosevic.”<sup>117</sup> A similar aspersion in the political press also released Vuk Brankovic from the “greatest traitor in history” status and blamed Milosevic for turning on his fellow Serbs damning him as the “greatest traitor in Serbian history.”<sup>118</sup>

The Dayton Peace Accords that ended the Yugoslav civil war in 1995 addressed immediate concerns in Croatia and Bosnia and intentionally avoided the core issue of Kosovo’s status as a Serb province. Not surprisingly, by 1998, violence between Serbian authorities in Kosovo and Kosovar Albanians fed up with Serbian rule escalated. A parallel Kosovo Albanian government and school system was functioning and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) was no longer a behind-the-scenes organization. In the

spring of 1998, war returned to Kosovo.

Serb General Nebojsa Pavkovic commanded the Serb forces in Kosovo and provided his thoughts on Kosovo in a 2000 *Frontline* interview. His comments demonstrate the strength of the Kosovo Polje mythology and its effects:

I think that the whole world knows what Kosovo means to Serbia. . . . It is its cradle. . . . Serbia is in Kosovo, and Kosovo is in Serbia. Serbian roots are in Kosovo, and everything that is connected to the Serbs throughout the past centuries is there. Every Serb is intimately connected to it.<sup>119</sup>

The link between the Kosovo present and Kosovo past is evident in Pavkovic's comments. His misguided assumption that the "whole world knows what Kosovo means to Serbia" illustrates the perceived universal awareness of Serbia's struggle and its victimization. The general's final comments echoed the timeless rally cry, "we are prepared to die for Kosovo" and ominously stated, "we will return" again when the UN and NATO mandate in Kosovo expires or fails.<sup>120</sup> Keeping with history, the Serbian Orthodox Church supported the Serb military actions in Kosovo. Clergy proclaimed a new battle of Kosovo where the Albanian flag replaced the Holy Cross "for the first time since the Battle of Kosovo" and Serbs were threatened by a "centuries-old Shqiptars [derogatory term for Slavic Muslims] dream of an ethnically cleansed Kosovo."<sup>121</sup>

With the arrival of NATO troops to Kosovo in 1999, the Kosovo epic history continued into another cycle of revenge. It transitioned from Serb domination that began earlier in the decade to Kosovo Albanian revenge, transferring ethnic memories, both long term and recent, into vengeful action. Serbian claims of oppression and cultural genocide in Kosovo have once again surfaced and remain the central emotional issue facing Serbia. Viewed through the Kosovo Prism, Kosovo is again an occupied land by outsiders where Serbs are oppressed. A traitor in the form of Slobodan Milosevic

betrayed the Serbian people by giving in to the demands of outsiders and signing away the Serbian hearth. This most recent defeat validates the victimhood of the Serb people, the existence of its Muslim enemy, and the ungrateful outside world. The Kosovo cycle of events continues and Vidovdan celebrations now have a chapter of new material through which Serbs can relive the past and apply to the future. Serb historian Aleksa Djilas relates that the cycle of revenge may never be broken due to the Balkan reality that “the possibility of revenge increases the desire.” More specifically, he relates that “the Serbs are not exactly a forgive and forget nation. If they have remembered the 1389 defeat for 610 years, why not this one?”<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Warren Zimmerman, *Origins of a Catastrophe: Yugoslavia and its Destroyers* (New York: Times Books, 1996), 13.

<sup>2</sup>Florian Bieber, “Nationalist Mobilization and Stories of Serb Suffering,” *Rethinking History* 6, no. 1 (2002): 97.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 98.

<sup>5</sup>Zimmerman, 13.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>8</sup>Bokovoy, Melissa, “Scattered Graves, Ordered Cemeteries--Commemorating Serbia’s Wars of National Liberation, 1912-1918,” in *Staging the Past: The Politics of Commemoration in Habsburg Central Europe, 1848 to Present* ed. Maria Bacur, 236 (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2001). Also, Colovic, 6; Sell, 73; and Pavlowitch, 12 use the term framework.

<sup>9</sup>Ivan Colovic, *Politics of Identity in Serbia: Essays in Political Anthropology*. (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 6, 58.

<sup>10</sup>Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 58.

<sup>11</sup>Robert Thomas, *The Politics of Serbia in the 1990s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 13.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>13</sup>Stevan Pavlowitch, *Serbia: The History of an Idea* (New York: New York City University Press, 2002), 12.

<sup>14</sup>Thomas, 13.

<sup>15</sup>Louis Sell, *Slobodan Milosevic and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (U.S.A.: Duke University Press, 2002), 73.

<sup>16</sup>Sima Cirkovic, *The Serbs* (Maldon, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 85.

<sup>17</sup>Colovic, 65.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 59, note 1.

<sup>21</sup>Michael Sells, "Crosses of Blood: Sacred Space, Religion, and Violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina-The 2002 Paul Hanly Furfey Lecture," in *Sociology of Religion*, (fall 2003): 3.

<sup>22</sup>Colovic, 69.

<sup>23</sup>Maja Mikula, "Nationalism and the Rhetoric of Exclusion," *Southeast European Politics* 3, no. 1 (June 2003): 68.

<sup>24</sup>Sells, 3, and 5.

<sup>25</sup>Zimmerman, 17, 229.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>27</sup>Colovic, 1.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>29</sup>Julie A. Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), xix.

<sup>30</sup>Christos Pavloudis, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Southern Balkans* (Monterey, Naval Post Graduate School, 2002), 23-24.

- <sup>31</sup>Ibid., 24.
- <sup>32</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup>Ibid., 25.
- <sup>34</sup>Ibid., 33.
- <sup>35</sup>Ibid., 31.
- <sup>36</sup>Ibid., 29.
- <sup>37</sup>Ibid., 31-32.
- <sup>38</sup>Ibid., 31.
- <sup>39</sup>Sells, 2.
- <sup>40</sup>Ibid., 5.
- <sup>41</sup>Mertus, 184-185.
- <sup>42</sup>Dusan Batakovic, *The Kosovo Chronicles* (Belgrade, Serbia: PLATO Press, 1992), 1; [Serbian National Defense Website]; available from [www.snd-us.com/history/dusan/kc\\_part3.htm](http://www.snd-us.com/history/dusan/kc_part3.htm); Internet; accessed 26 December 2004.
- <sup>43</sup>Pavlowitch, 29, 31.
- <sup>44</sup>Pavlowitch, 28.
- <sup>45</sup>Thomas Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo 1389*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 123.
- <sup>46</sup>Steven W. Sowards, *Twenty-Five Lectures on Modern Balkan History (The Balkans in the Age of Nationalism)*, *Lecture 13: Serbian Nationalism from the "Nacertanije" to the Yugoslav Kingdom*, 1996; available from [www.lib.msu.edu/sowards/balkan/lect13.htm](http://www.lib.msu.edu/sowards/balkan/lect13.htm); Internet; accessed 18 March 2005.
- <sup>47</sup>Nada Milosevic-Djordjevic, *The History of Serbian Culture*, 8 October, 2004, 1-2; available from [http://www.suc.org/culture/history/Hist\\_Serb\\_Culture/chi/Oral\\_Tradition.htm](http://www.suc.org/culture/history/Hist_Serb_Culture/chi/Oral_Tradition.htm); Internet.
- <sup>48</sup>Emmert, 129.
- <sup>49</sup>Ibid., 130.
- <sup>50</sup>Ibid., 131.

<sup>51</sup>Colovic, 130.

<sup>52</sup>Emmert, 133-134.

<sup>53</sup>Bokovoy, 241.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 237-238.

<sup>56</sup>Sells, 4.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Bieber, 100.

<sup>59</sup>Sabrina Petra Ramet, *Balkan Babel* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 28.

<sup>60</sup>Sowards, Lecture 13.

<sup>61</sup>Emmert, 134.

<sup>62</sup>Sell, 72.

<sup>63</sup>Pavlowitch, 96-100.

<sup>64</sup>Bokovoy, 239.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 241.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 253, Note 15.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 243.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 252.

<sup>70</sup>Colovic, 11.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>72</sup>The Ustasha (insurgent) fascist movement was launched by Ante Pavelic to fight for Croatian independence during the reign of King Alexander (1929-1934). The movement peaked during World War II when it ruled Croatia as a puppet Axis government and committed atrocities against minority groups, specifically the Serbs.



<sup>73</sup>Gerald Moller, *Exploring the Dynamics of the Yugoslav Crisis* (Monterey: Naval Post Graduate School, 1995), 82.

<sup>74</sup>Thomas, 9.

<sup>75</sup>Moller, 83.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>Mertus, 45.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>80</sup>Pavlowitch, 231.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 188.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>The Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences Memorandum 1986, 1998 (24 September 2004), 3; [Hrvatski Information Center web page]; available from <http://www.hic.hr/books/greatserbia/sanu.htm>; Internet.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>86</sup>Malcolm, 341.

<sup>87</sup>Mertus, 137.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 140.

<sup>89</sup>Laura Silber, Allan Little, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (United States: Penguin Books, 1996), 33.

<sup>90</sup>Malcolm, 341-342.

<sup>91</sup>Sell, 3.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid.

<sup>94</sup>Bieber, 100.

- <sup>95</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>96</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>97</sup>John Frederick Patten II, *Precursor to Conflict: The Cultural Re-Coding of Serbia* (Monterey: Naval Post Graduate School, 1996), xii.
- <sup>98</sup>Bieber, 102.
- <sup>99</sup>Ibid., 95.
- <sup>100</sup>Bennett, 107.
- <sup>101</sup>Bieber, 102.
- <sup>102</sup>Sell, 88-89.
- <sup>103</sup>Misha Glenny, *The Fall of Yugoslavia: The Third Balkan War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 34-35.
- <sup>104</sup>Bieber, 101-102.
- <sup>105</sup>Malcolm, 344.
- <sup>106</sup>Mertus, 185.
- <sup>107</sup>Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 1995), 133.
- <sup>108</sup>Bogdan Denitch, *Ethnic Nationalism: The Tragic Death of Yugoslavia* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 117.
- <sup>109</sup>Mertus, 113.
- <sup>110</sup>Colovic, 27.
- <sup>111</sup>Ibid., 63.
- <sup>112</sup>Ibid., 11.
- <sup>113</sup>Sells, 4.
- <sup>114</sup>Thomas, 237.
- <sup>115</sup>Ibid., 103.
- <sup>116</sup>Ibid., 251.

<sup>117</sup>Ibid., 239.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., 242.

<sup>119</sup>Nebojsa Pavkovic, “War in Europe: Interview with Nebojsa Pavkovic,” interviewed by Peter J. Boyer, *Frontline*, Part I, Producers Michael Kirk, Eamonn Mathews, and Rick Young (February 2000): 1.

<sup>120</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>121</sup>Amfilohije Radovi, Metropolitan of Montenegro and Littora, *Interview of the Day: Saturday, February 26, 2000, Metropolitan of Montenegro Bishop Amfilohije Radovi* (Belgrade: Metropolitan of Montenegro and Littora; February, 2000): 5; available from [www.mitropolija.cg.yu/aktuelno/saopstenja/e\\_int\\_b92\\_000226.html](http://www.mitropolija.cg.yu/aktuelno/saopstenja/e_int_b92_000226.html); Internet.

<sup>122</sup>Tim Judah, *Kosovo: War and Revenge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 312.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The past is the textbook of tyrants, the future the bible of the free.<sup>1</sup>

Herman Melville

After a decade of war and violence, the loose Yugoslav Federation consisted of only Serbia and Montenegro, Slobodan Milosevic was in jail for war crimes, and Kosovo with portions of Bosnia-Herzegovina were occupied by NATO and administered by the UN. Warfare over cultural territory left dead and displaced people from the Adriatic Sea to Macedonia. Estimates of the horrors in Bosnia include 237,500 dead, over twelve thousand rapes, and 2.7 million displaced persons.<sup>2</sup> In Kosovo, an estimated twelve thousand Albanians died between 1998 and 1999 during the Serb campaigns against the civilian population.<sup>3</sup> Countless unreported revenge killings against Serbs and acts of violence across the region continued in the presence of peacekeeping forces.

Despite its military power advantage, in the end, the Serbs were defeated and divided. The Serb “frontier” in Croatia was lost. Bosnian Serbs were forced to give up twenty percent of the recently acquired territory in a peace accord with Milosevic acting as their self-serving representative. There was no Greater Serbia despite the national slogan of “all Serbs in one state.” Closer to the Serbian heart, Kosovo was lost and out of Serbian control indefinitely. These latest developments set the stage for another application of the cycle of Kosovo Polje mythology. It continues to serve as the basis for Serbian national identity and an interpretive lens through which Serbs view history, people, and events resulting in a range of effects from the individual to national levels. The decision to celebrate yet another defeat through the eulogies of Vidovdan, embrace

victimhood as the trusted historic companion, and inculcate yet another generation of “little Kosovo avengers” faces the Serb culture. The decision process is on-going and the result is unclear. There is little evidence that shows progress towards cultural cooperation and tolerance in Serbia. Countless media sources and websites address the “genocide” against Serbs and their cultural sites in Kosovo and review the list of the latest injustices against the Serb people. The Serbian Orthodox Church continues its historical role as one of the most outspoken elements of Serb society proclaiming the victimization of the Serbian people and creating the need for continued cultural struggle. The United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) acknowledges that acts of violence occur in Kosovo against the Serbs but reports no evidence of genocide in the province.<sup>4</sup> The current Prime Minister of Serbia, Vojislav Kostunica, suggests that Slobodan Milosevic’s worst crimes were against the Serbian people and not the thousands of other non-Serbs affected by his disastrous tenure.<sup>5</sup> The official Serbian Government homepage displays “Terror in Kosovo” as its most prominent information link common to all pages of the site.<sup>6</sup> A more complete study of current Serb attitudes and beliefs could provide a more accurate indication of progress. One can only hope that individual Serbs will choose to look towards future cooperation after a decade of manipulated myths and history.

Other voices suggest that Serbia may be on the path to a functioning democracy, tolerant of all cultures with equality as its foundation. Ivan Colovic suggests that Serbia is on the road to democracy as long as it refuses the temptation of “leader worship” and acknowledges that the misery and shame of the 1990s was not “dignified suffering,” but a mistake.<sup>7</sup> One precondition to success is the re-direction of powerful cultural myths like the Kosovo Polje mythology away from politics. On a more personal level, Serbs who

use the Kosovo Prism must lock it away. The ethnic division and cultural memory that it produces ties them to the past and perpetuates the need for struggle and victimhood.

Florian Bieber adds that the Kosovo myth must “be removed from the political sphere and restored to the realm of cultural heritage.”<sup>8</sup> Julie Mertus suggests that the Serbs must disable “national truths” while Robert Thomas adds, they must accept a “viable alternative to the previous socio-political process of rhetoric and symbolism in order to restore credibility to politics.”<sup>9</sup> The basis for those national truths, political rhetoric, and symbolism so pervasive late in the twentieth century was the Kosovo Polje mythology. Author Zoran Misic suggests that the original true meaning of the Kosovo epic is lost and it has been changed into a “warrior myth of a warrior tribe . . . transformed into the aggressive and hegemonistic programme of one class.”<sup>10</sup>

The consensus of the Balkans scholar community indicates the path to progress in Serbia includes four key factors: a cultural self-assessment and acknowledgment of past mistakes, the renewal of broken ties, a willingness to compromise, and the use of cultural myths for ethnic heritage instead of division. Sima Cirkovic notes that Serbs must no longer have the need to “struggle for liberation and unification” and instead should reach out to previous enemies and the rest of the world.<sup>11</sup> Noel Malcolm provides one solution to “challenge the fixed pattern of thought which has held them [Serbs] in its grip for so long.” He predicts that “when ordinary Serbs learn to think more rationally and humanely about Kosovo, and more critically about some of their own national myths, all the people in Kosovo and Serbia will benefit--not least the Serbs themselves.”<sup>12</sup>

Similar to the Kosovo Polje mythology, other symbolic and historic cultural epic stories, usually shrouded in religion, provide cultures throughout the world with

motivation, heritage, and tribulation. As Maria Bacur identifies in *Staging the Past*, creation and commemoration of ethnic history and mythology was common in Eastern Europe. Like the Serbs, the Czech, Hungarian, and Romanian cultural identities were dependent upon the pseudo-truths of epic stories and folklore for much of their meaning. Further to the east, the Caucasus regional struggles based on ethnic territory and centuries of learned hatred in Ngorno-Karabak, Armenia, Chechnya in Russia, and Abkhazia, Georgia illustrate the use of ethnically symbolic movements and their effects on the world around them. In the Middle East, the most prominent cultural flashpoint is the Arab-Israeli conflict. With biblical roots, the conflict epitomizes the struggle for territory and justified revenge passed on to generations as heritage. In northern Iraq, the Kurdish homeland of Kurdistan overlaps portions of multiple countries with claims to cultural heritage in each. The Muslim-Hindu conflict in Kashmir, with the Kashmiri people in between, continues today with roots dating back to the second century.<sup>13</sup> In Africa, the Rwanda and Burundi region is still in turmoil from the six hundred year old Hutu-Tutsi history of ethnic division. The global list of conflicts unfortunately is long and growing, but what do they all have in common? The detailed answer is beyond the scope of this study, however, certain common traits exist. The failure to turn away from cultural memory, eliminate the celebration of tragic events, and change the learned pattern of violent behavior guarantees the uninterrupted employment of ethnic memories and myths. Additionally, it appears that cultures that have experienced economic, political, and educational progress and stability are less likely to look to the past for resolution through the use of cultural myths. Regions that have experienced such progress and stability such as Western Europe with its rich history, the United Kingdom, and North

America are examples of regions where cultural differences are still quite evident but are less likely to serve as the basis or justification for violent conflict.

As Serbia and the rest of the Balkan region attempt to repair the events of the last six and a quarter centuries, lessons can be drawn today from the study of the Kosovo Polje mythology. The study of the Serbian epic is simply a study of people. Effective study leads to understanding. That understanding provides an awareness and appreciation of the history and motivation of culture that enables communication and respect--two *basic* ingredients to peaceful coexistence and resolution. The utility of this education is both personal and global. To the tourist, it may mean the difference between a pleasant or curt conversation, accurate directions, or an invitation for plum brandy and dinner. To the politician or statesman, it provides insight into what motivates a culture, the behavior of a society and its leaders, and the viewpoint of the media. It provides an opportunity to demonstrate respect and appreciation for cultural history in order to establish credibility and gain legitimacy. To the profession of arms, knowledge of history and culture provide, at times, greater worth and utility than ammunition. A warfighter armed with cultural understanding and the knowledge of the historical context within which he operates is far better prepared to face the human dimension of warfare--a challenging dimension that has come to the forefront of today's contemporary operating environment. This, in turn, may help to prevent another negative chapter in the cycle of a cultural epic such as the Kosovo Polje mythology.

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<sup>1</sup>Warren Zimmerman, *Origins of a Catastrophe: Yugoslavia and its Destroyers* (New York: Times Books, 1996), 229.

<sup>2</sup>Louis Sell, *Slobodan Milosevic and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (U.S.A.: Duke University Press, 2002), 360.



<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), *UNMIK Homepage*, 4 May 2005, <http://www.unmikonline.org> (May 2005).

<sup>5</sup>Sell, 358.

<sup>6</sup>*Official Site of the Serbian Government Homepage*, 12 April 2005, <http://www.srbija.sr.gov.yu/> (12 April 2005).

<sup>7</sup>Ivan Colovic, *Politics of Identity in Serbia: Essays in Political Anthropology*. (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 305-306.

<sup>8</sup>Florian Bieber, "Nationalist Mobilization and Stories of Serb Suffering," *Rethinking History 6: 1*, (2002): 107.

<sup>9</sup>Robert Thomas, *The Politics of Serbia in the 1990s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 432.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., footnote 4.

<sup>11</sup>Sima Cirkovic, *The Serbs* (Maldon, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 296.

<sup>12</sup>Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 356.

<sup>13</sup>UMMAH Muslim News Directory, *UMMAH.ORG*, 3 May 2005, <http://www.ummah.org.uk/kashmir/history/htm> (3 May 2005).

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